

# Here Be Dragons

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Summary: Gather round, and let me tell you the story of the Great Dragon Tamer-the tale few know. Let me tell you of his life after his battle with the Red Death, of his friends, and of his enemies. Let me tell you why all sane men fear the Vikings, and why those sane men emblazon their maps of Viking territories with the ominous words "Here Be Dragons."

## 1. Chapter 1

\*\*And we're off on a whirlwind adventure. I'm actually quite excited to get started on this, because it's been rolling around in my head for a few days. Just know before you start, if you want a story filled with happiness and sunshine and rainbows, you're reading the wrong thing. It's not going to be a tragedyâ€"though some parts will be tragicâ€"but it will not be a rousing comedy either. Bad things will happen, shit will go down, people will die, and Hiccup will grow up. This is also not a romance. There will of course be romantic elements, but a thrilling romance is not the purpose of this story. This story will be full to the brim with cultural and historical references, often of the Anglo-Saxons or the Normans as well as the Norse, and probably more than the average person (who is not an anthropologist) could ever want to know. For the the purpose of writing what I want to read, I have written this. I enjoy vivid images and facts about the cultures I'm dealing with. I like large casts of characters from all walks of life. I like complex story lines that can't resolve in a few chapters, but span a long period of time. I like long narratives. If that is not your cup of tea, I will not be insulted if you press the back button and continue perusing, I promise. But if you do continue, consider yourself warned. An anthropologist is writing this, and it will certainly be a cultural and character study, rather than a plot-driven piece.\*\*

\*\*If you haven't already, check out the prequel, "For Everything Else" (which is currently incomplete, as I will be working on these simultaneously) and even go ahead and look at "This Time, For

Sure."\*\*

\*\*I do not own How to Train Your Dragon, books or movie franchise.\*\*

\*\*Chapter 1: Normanz\*\*

"...just you and me. Maybe a fewâ€"

"Sh!" Astrid pressed herself against the wooden slats of the wall and glared at Snotlout. "Not now!"

"Gods, Tuffnut!" Ruffnut hissed. "Just once could youâ€"

"Guys!" Astrid reminded them with a harsh whisper. "Shut up!" She peered around the corner and spotted Fishlegs scurrying over. He bumped into a barrel of spears near a wall. The weapons rattles and the pointy heads clanged. Astrid groaned internally and ground her teeth. They were going to get caught.

The rest of the plan had to go perfectly, or else every step would have been for nothing.

Fishlegs ran up to her and bent over wheezing. "Gone...just left...out back...morning duties..."

She grabbed his shoulder. "Where is \_he\_?"

The boy pointed behind him. "Sleeping. I...I think...Didn't go inside..."

"You \_think\_?" She yanked him around and slammed him against the wall. He flailed and slapped Snotlout in the face.

"Ow!" Snotlout said loudly.

"Sorry!" Fishlegs whimpered.

"Quiet!" Astrid hissed. She looked at them and caught a glimpse of the lightening horizon. Time was running out. They had to get their plan rolling before sunset... "Let's go!" She ducked around the corner and ran, low to the ground across the dirt. When she reached a wall close to their target, she pressed her back against it and waited for the four other teens to catch up.

"So, if it were me," Snotlout began quietly, "would youâ€"

"I'd never do this for you," Astrid replied shortly.

The boy gaped at her. "But...for Hiccupâ€"

"You're not Hiccup."

Fishlegs reached the wall last and leaned against it. He was tired from all the running and sneaking around, and she felt bad about giving him the task of first scoping out the target location, but someone had to, and someone had to keep Snotlout and the twins from giving their position away completely.

She looked at the kids and pointed to the building. "Alright, we're

going in. Open the door, sneak up the steps as quietly as you can. He cannot wake up. He cannot see us. If he does, we're done for." She turned to face the structure. "I'll take care of Toothless." She took a deep breath.

"Wait!" Tuffnut leaned over. "What do we do once we get there?"

She rolled her eyes. "Wait for my order and then pounce," she said as if it were obvious. Which it was. "Move out."

The distance to the door seemed to grow with every step, but when they finally reached it, she took a deep breath and pushed. The hinges creaked and she winced and froze; hearing no movement within, she waved at the other kids, and they all crept inside, toward the wooden stairs to the left, and up the steps. Their way at the top was blocked by a trap door.

"Ok," Astrid murmured. "Ok." She pushed just enough to lift the door, then grabbed the edge and used her grip to push with more control. She lifted herself through the hole and stood up slowly, keeping her grip on the wood and slowly lowering it to the ground so the others could get up.

Tuffnut shoved through first, followed by Ruffnut. Snotlout jumped up and made some sort of wild hand motion that Astrid assumed was meant to be some sort of code. She shrugged and shook her head at him. How on earth such an idiot could possibly be related to Hiccup she would never understand. Fishlegs poked his head into the room and Snotlout gestured bigger.

Astrid shook her head again and started to mouth, "I don't know," but the whole affair distracted her and she lost her grip on the trap door. It slammed against the wooden floor and everyone froze, turning their heads toward a lump outlined in the moon glow of early morning. The lump moaned and shifted and then was completely still.

Astrid sighed in relief and looked away, only to meet two bright, green eyes. She made her way over, lightly stepping until she hit a board that creaked high. She quickly drew her foot back and glanced over at the lump.

The lump had not moved or made a sound.

She reached a bit farther with her right foot and slowly lowered her toes to the floor. When the board did not creak, she transferred all her weight and balanced on her right leg.

The pupils in the bright green eyes narrowed into slits, and she heard a low growl.

Astrid held up her hands. "No, no, no!" she whispered. "Toothless! It's me! Astrid! It's ok, Toothless."

The pupils widened and moved toward her.

"Stay there!"

The eyes quickly pulled back and the green eyes went catawampus as the great beast cocked his head to the side.

"We need to be quiet," Astrid said quietly as she tread lightly. "He can't wake up, or we'll be in trouble."

The dragon purred slightly.

"I'm just going to come to you...Ruffnut!" Astrid hissed, suddenly remembering something. "Did you get theâ€" "

"Bag?" the other girl finished. "Got it. We have everything we need."

Astrid nodded and turned back to the dragon, taking a few more careful steps. She extended her hand and brushed her fingers over smooth scales. Not hot or cold, just smooth and hard. "It's ok," she repeated. She reached behind the dragon. "We just need a little light..." She felt wood against her palm and ran her hand along the grainy surface, searching for a crack. When she found it, she traced it with her fingers until she found the latch, lifted it, and pulled.

The window shutters opened with slight jump, and the first cracks of dawn light fell across the wooden floor and onto the sleeping lump. As she opened the window wider, she bit her lip and gazed at the pile of blankets.

Caution was key, she reminded herself. One false step could compromise the whole mission. She would not allow that. The mission was necessary. For Hiccup.

She looked at the other kids, and they nodded. Everything was ready. There was only one final step: they had to take care of the sleeper. Then, the plan would be fully underway, and nothing could stop their success.

Slowly as quietly, she tip-toed over to the lump of blankets on the bed. She took a deep breath. "It's time," she murmured.

The others took their positions around the bed, determination flashing in their eyes.

She smiled slightly. "No turning back."

Fishlegs glanced at the window and the sky that continued to grow brighter by the second. "We need to do it now," he warned in his nervous way. "The light could wake him up before we have a chance to do it..."

Astrid looked around and nodded. "One," she mouthed.

Snotlout rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. Tuffnut cracked his knuckles.

"Two..."

Ruffnut flexed her fingers while Fishlegs bobbed nervously.

Astrid looked down at the sleeper. It was now or never. For Hiccup.

"Three!" she hissed before the kids screamed in unison, "HAPPY

BIRTHDAY!"

"WAH!" the lump shouted as it flailed and fell off the bed. "Gah...ow..." A head of dark auburn hair popped up and a hand reached up to rub at closed eyes. "What the..." Green, confused eyes flew open and glanced around. "You're in my house..."

"Surprise!" Fishlegs shouted unnecessarily.

"No kidding..." Hiccup replied in his usual nasal mumble, though his words were more slurred in his drowsiness. "Gods...why would you..." He glared across the room. "Toothless! Why didn't you do anything..."

"Oh, he tried," Astrid assured him with a grin. "But he knows my voice. He likes me, and he would never give us away." The thought always made her happy. Toothless liked her. Toothless approved of her. And that approval carried as much weight as the approval of Hiccup's own father, the Chief, Stoick the Vast.

"Useless reptile," Hiccup muttered as he disentangled himself from the blankets. He accomplished the task with considerable difficulty and used the bedpost to haul himself to a one-legged standing position. "What time is it..." He caught sight of the open window. "Gods...Is the sun even up?"

"Will be soon," Ruffnut replied with a smirk.

Hiccup shook his head and slowly sat on the bed. "You're all crazy...I mean, I consider myself an early riser, but this is just..."

Was he always so...expressive in the mornings? Astrid made a mental note and walked over to him. "Look alive!" she said cheerfully. "You're a man today! Seventeen!"

Hiccup gave her that slightly agitated look of his. "I was a man last year," he reminded her. "I distinctly recall a huge feast and a bunch of unnecessary pomp and circumstance and a really annoying ceremony that Snotlout laughed throughout."

"Yeah, but this is your first one as a man already," Snotlout pointed out. "Besides, it was Astrid's idea."

"I figured," Hiccup grumbled. "Someone always suffers when she gets ideas."

Astrid glared at him.

Ruffnut shoved a bag in Hiccup's face. "We brought mead! Three bottles!"

"We could just go to the mead hall andâ€"

"Yeah," Tuffnut agreed. "But this is more fun."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Oh. I'm glad my discomfort is fun to you." A small smile played at the corner of his mouth, and Astrid knew he was not mad. A little grumpy to have been woken up so early, but still his usual witty, nice self.

Astrid took the bag from Ruffnut and opened it. "Besides, the mead hall has been taken over to prepare for the Thing this afternoon."

"It's not a Thing," Hiccup said. "It's more of a...Chiefs' Counsel."

Astrid handed him a bottle and sat down next to him. "Whatever. You have to be there."

Hiccup untied the tiny piece of leather and removed the oiled cloth covering the mouth of the bottle.

"Which is why we're kidnapping you now," Tuffnut added.

"What?" The skinny boy almost dropped the bottle. "Kidnapping?"

"Not kidnapping exactly," Fishlegs explained as he accepted a bottle from Astrid. "That makes it sound mean."

"We're distracting you," Astrid said. "Taking you for a spin before the politics takes you away."

Hiccup puffed his cheeks then blew heavily and reached underneath the bed. After a moment of fumbling, he pulled out his prosthetic by the metal toe. "Do you think we could maybe run into some trouble and miss the whole ordeal?"

"Hiccup, you have to go," Astrid said. "You need to learn all this stuff. You'll be the chief one day."

Hiccup scrunched up his nose. "Yeah, but that's a long time from now." He passed the opened bottle to Tuffnut and set to work rolling up his leggings so he could fit the prosthetic over his stump.

She had once asked him if the wood chafed, and he had told her that he had lined it with leather and a thick wool padding.

She turned away when she saw a flash of skin. It did not disgust her, or make her cringe, but the scars scared her, a reminder of a time when she had thought she had lost him before even having him. Whenever she thought about it her chest would clench painfully, and she was certain that the idea of losing him after really knowing him was far worse. She cleared her throat and took a swig from the bottle in her hand. She cringed immediately. "Ruffnut! You got the sweet stuff!"

"Oh, I'll take it," Hiccup said as he yanked on a leather strap that wound around his shin and kept his foot intact. He tied off his leggings near the top of the wooden part and reached for the bottle.

As she passed off the bottle, Tuffnut handed her the one in his hands. "This one's dry."

Astrid smiled and drank. She had once mentioned how weird it was that he preferred sweet and light while she preferred her drink stronger. He had simply told her that it worked well that way. They balanced each other.

She handed off the bottle to Snotlout.

After passing the bottles around and draining the contents and eating some honey cakes pilfered from Fishlegs' house, Hiccup stretched his arms toward the ceiling and stood up. "Where are we going?"

"Away," Tuffnut supplied helpfully.

"We're just going to take our dragons flying," Fishlegs said. "Before the ships arrive and you have to go down to meet all the arriving chiefs and important people."

"It'd be better if we could avoid all of that," Hiccup said.

Astrid jumped up. "Then let's move!" She headed for the trap in the floor and skipped down the stairs, knowing everyone would be behind her.

As soon as they stepped into the crisp morning, Hiccup punched her in the arm.

"Hey!" She rubbed the spot. It actually did hurt. Time at the forge and days of riding had given him enough muscle to make a statement, though he still had difficulty ripping trees out of the ground and splitting logs with his bare hands. Not that those things bothered her. Those things made him Hiccup. "What was that for?" she asked.

"That's for waking me up so early."

She looked up at him and marveled not for the first time that year that she had to raise her eyes to see his face. Back when he had defeated the Red Death, she had been shorter than she had been. Then he had hit a crazy growth spurt after he had turned fifteen and in no time at all he was standing a few inches above her. Along those lines, manhood had been particularly kind to him. His voice had deepened slightly, though he still spoke in that nasal mumble that made her feel like laughing. He had finally grown into his slightly too-long face, his jaw had broadened, and every feature had sharpened and matured. Except his nose, which had retained its boyish turn-up at the end. She liked that.

As she met his eyes, her heart started beating faster. Mischief and confidence of a particular Hiccup brand played in the depths of green, and his freckled face glowed with excitement. She found herself leaning forward in anticipation.

He did not disappoint.

He brought a hand to the side of her face and tipped her head back before leaning down slightly and pressing his lips against hers.

Ooh...She liked kissing him.

As he pulled back, he murmured, "That's for everything else."

She smiled and grabbed the back of his head and pulled him back down.

Hiccup made some sort of awkward gulping noise and lost his balance for a bit before he placed his hands on her waist.

Yes, she \_really\_ liked kissing him. She enjoyed everything about the activity: the soft skin of his lips, the fluttering in her chest, the warm feeling in her stomach, andâ€”more recentlyâ€”the coarse stubble underneath her fingertips. She ran her fingers along his jawline as he slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss.

Kissing Hiccup was definitely one of her favourite pastimes.

"Alright, you two," Ruffnut said. "That's enough."

"Can you separate so we can go?" Snotlout called out harshly.

Hiccup pulled back again and smiled that adorable crooked grin that made her stomach feel tingly and her thoughts go fuzzy.

"I totally called it," Tuffnut declared. "When they had that scuffle in the ring..." He cackled. "Love on the battlefield."

Snotlout turned away. "Let's just go flying..."

Astrid had to look away before she succumbed to the urge to kiss Hiccup again. Something large and scaly bumped into her hand, and she glanced down and smiled as Toothless wormed his head under her palm.

"Hey, bud," Hiccup said. "Ready to go flying?"

Toothless closed his eyes with a deep throated purr and Astrid laughed as she scratched at the black scales.

"I thought so."

\* \* \*

><p>A young brunet man pressed himself against the stone wall of a long hallway and squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to take his thoughts away from the situation, from the grunts and gasps and moans permeating the wood of the door a good thirty paces from him. The fact that he had not been exposed to such activity for thirteen years did not at all prevent his knowing what was happening. He was familiar with the scriptures; he had first read the Song of Solomon under strict supervision four years earlier.<p>

He was aware of the obvious, as well as the implications, and while he could tolerate the obvious with some embarrassment, the implications made him sick. Prostitution and the poor daughters of God who were slaves to such a life...

He wondered why the Captain had not chosen one of his men to deliver the message, why someone else had not been sent to find the absent soldier.

It was a test of patience, he decided, a test of his strength of spirit. As the Enemy had tested Christ in the desert.



Christ had been tempted with earthly pleasures, the young man reminded himself, while his own situation was simply terrifying. Yet he stayed, consumed with morbid fascination one moment, fear and a desire to flee the next.

"Vocavitque Moses Iosue et dixit ei coram omni Israhel confortare et esto robustus tu enim introduces populum istum in terram quam daturum se patribus eorum iuravit Dominus et tu eam sorte divides," he recited quietly. "Et Dominus qui ductor vester est ipse erit tecum nondimittet nec derelinquette noli timere nec paveas." He sighed and leaned his head against the wall, murmuring the words in his own tongue. "Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'" The situation was not the same, he conceded. He was not becoming a great leader like Joshua, but the words provided a measure of comfort.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the door at the end of the hall. The noise had stopped, and after hesitating for a moment he tucked his hands into his long, woolen sleeves and started walking. He was a good ten paces from the door when it flew open and a young girl, younger than he was, stepped into the hallway.

The girl tucked a small, jingling bag into a broad sash cinching her waist and stopped when she saw him. First she glanced away, then she quickly looked back, her mouth slightly slack.

He ducked his head and walked past. He wanted to give her words of encouragement, to tell her that there were other paths in life, that there were ways to live a life pleasing to God, but he knew that she would not understand him. She was Anglo-Saxon, and he did not speak her language.

That was an excuse, he knew. He was a coward. He wondered not for the first time since leaving Normanz if Father Abram had made the correct choice in sending him on such an important mission.

He reached out his hand and rapped his knuckles lightly on the doorframe.

"What?" a hard voice called.

The young man cleared his throat and said quietly, "The Captain asked me to come find you."

Another young man stepped out of the room and slammed the door shut. The first young man jumped slightly.

The first young man met the cold brown eyes of the second. They were the same height, he and Simon, but the second man was much broader and thus much more intimidating.

Simon looked over the young man's shoulder and then grinned wickedly. "Did you see her?"

The man nodded.

"What did you think?"

The first young man swallowed and answered clearly, "I found her sad." And lovely, but he refused to give Simon anything to latch onto.

After a moment, the second man snorted. "No fun. Can't have fun with a monk." He pushed past the first man. "Not even a monk at that. Novice Jehan." He let out a bark of laughter.

The first man turned to follow Simon down the long corridor.

"Why would I ever think a monk could judge a woman?" Simon whipped around and leered at Jehan. "You keep yourselves so pure and clean, no idea of what's between a girl's legs...You probably wouldn't know what to do with a woman if one were naked in your bed."

Jehan wanted to say that he fully understood what Simon was talking about, that lack of exposure did not equate to complete ignorance, but he kept his mouth shut. Why add fuel to the fire?

"You know what the women say about you?" Simon continued, determined to get a rise out of the young novice. "'Too pretty to be a monk. It'd be a waste,' they say."

Jehan looked down at the floor.

"You've probably used that face to your advantage, eh?" Simon chuckled. "Probably been having fun on the sly, eh?"

Jehan's eyes snapped up. "Our precepts guide us on the path to purity and godliness, devoid of the material, maintaining a life that is above censure and pleasing to the Most High."

Simon grabbed Jehan by the front of his robes and the clasp of his short cloak and shoved him hard against the wall. "You watch what you say," he sneered. "I believe in God and damnation, same as the next man, but I don't appreciate your people going around acting all high and mighty, pretending you're better than the lot of us." He spat.

Jehan winced and fought the urge to wipe away the saliva running slowly down his right cheek.

"You keep your worthless piety." Simon released Jehan and wiped his hands on the front of his tunic. "And keep your holy nose out of my face." He turned and started walking.

Jehan reached up and swiped his cheek with his long sleeve and murmured, "As long as you keep yours out of mine."

Simon stopped. "What?"

Jehan quickly scuttled past the larger man.

"What did you say?"

He broke into a full run and did not stop until he had wound his way down staircases and halls and was leaning against the wooden door to

the room he and Brother Martinus used. After waiting a moment to catch his breath, he pushed the door open and slipped inside.

"Another scuffle with Simon?" a cheerful bass voice asked.

Jehan sighed as he closed the door. "I know that Christ says we must love our neighbours, but I really cannot stand him." He turned and walked toward a pallet on the floor before falling unceremoniously onto the blankets. "I don't know how he does it, but he always manages to make me so..." He groaned in frustration and threw an arm across his eyes.

"Christ did say we have to love our neighbours, true," Brother Martinus said as he bent over a scrap of paper on his lap. He sat in the one wooden chair in the room, scratching words onto parchment with a messy scrawl. "Liking is a completely different matter."

Jehan took his arm back from his face and peered at the monk. "I don't understand."

The thin man smiled. "Do you think Christ himself particularly liked the men who mocked him? Loved of course, but I don't believe he particularly looked forward to each lovely encounter."

Jehan laughed quietly. "I suppose not."

"You can love someone without enjoying his company. And what is love?"

"'Love is patient, love is kind...'" Jehan drawled as he recited the Pauline epistle. "I know." He flipped onto his stomach and buried his face in his arms. "But whenever he starts trying to get to me...He succeeds, and then I have no patience or kindness or anything else!"

Brother Martinus only hummed to show that he had heard.

"I sometimes wonder if Father Abram made a mistake, that maybe I shouldn't be here."

"Do you want to be?" Brother Martinus asked.

Jehan brought his head up and rested his chin on his forearms and stared at the stone wall. A small spider climbed up the hewn rock and he watched it for a few seconds and wondered briefly to where the previous inhabitants of the monastery they currently occupied had disappeared. Had they gone North for fear of the soldiers? "I want to do God's work."

"You didn't answer the question," Brother Martinus pointed out.

The spider disappeared into a crevice. "I want to see what lies to the north. I want to see the people, to learn things I can't back home." He smiled. "I want to be here."

"Well, that's it then." Brother Martinus corked the bottle of ink next to the leg of the chair and placed his quill on the floor. "You were the most curious, the most willing, and the best option." A

minute of silence passed before he said, "I'm writing to the Father. I'm telling him I think it's time you took your permanent vows."

Jehan pushed himself up to his knees quickly and looked at Brother Martinus. "Really?"

The older man chuckled. "Nineteen and still the wide-eyed, excited, curious boy you were when you came to us." He nodded and waved the parchment in the air. "I'm sending this before we leave for the sea tomorrow, and once we get back to Normanz you'll officially join the order."

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid smiled at Hiccup as he waved his hands in the air enthusiastically and jabbered on about connecting rods and velocity and creating a stream-lined effect. He could talk forever about things no one really understood, things only a person with his brains and skills could even begin to comprehend.<p>

The other kids had gone home, and only she and Hiccup remained in the center of town with their respective dragons. She looked at Stormfly and gently scratched at the dragon's blue scales and her reptilian friend purred contentedly. She murmured a promise of chicken and looked back at Hiccup.

"I just have a feeling it would work better, don't you?"

Of course, she had no idea what exactly would work better. She opened her mouth and stared at those big green eyes. She wanted to ask what he had been thinking earlier when Tuffnut had randomly mentioned that Hiccup could get married, could have for a full year already. She wanted to ask why Hiccup had refused to look at her for the better part of an hour. It was an incredibly awkward subject, though, so she simply said, "Definitely."

The answer seemed to satisfy Hiccup and he smiled that crooked smile and started going on again.

Astrid gave Stormfly a final pat and Hiccup paused briefly in his rambling speech to tell Toothless to go home.

"How long is this supposed to last?" she asked before he could start again.

"What? Oh." Hiccup shrugged and started walking toward the Great Hall, and she fell in step beside him. "I don't know. Could last for an hour, could last for ten. That's the talking part." He sighed and looked up at the sky. "Then there's the drinking part. Who knows how long that will last." He laughed quietly. "Some of these chiefs can drink for \_days\_."

"Sounds like a good time," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes." As they rounded a corner his face broke into a wide grin. "No way..."

"What?" She followed his gaze to the building and noticed a girl sitting out front. She had her feet propped up on a table and her

face was covered by a curtain of thick, wavy brown hair. As they got closer, Astrid saw that her legs were covered from the knee down in brown leather boots, with her shins wrapped in sheepskin. Her arms were dressed in a similar fashion, with leather gloves covering everything from her biceps to her knuckles and sheepskin covering her forearms. The girl played with a knife, flipping it in the air and twirling it daringly between her fingers. "Who is that?" Astrid asked.

"An old friend," Hiccup murmured. He started jogging toward the girl and Astrid picked her pace as well. He skidded to a halt in front of the table. "Hey! Finna! Iâ€"

"Och, here we go," the girl said in a terribly thick accent that denoted she was from further South. She brushed her hair aside and looked at Hiccup briefly before turning her attention to her knife, still dancing along her knuckles.

Astrid peered over Hiccup's shoulder and tried to get a better look at his "old friend." The girl wore a dark green tunic with sleeves that stopped just above the leather gloves. She had a broad strip of leather around her waist, and it was fastened by a couple of bronze buckles. The tunic hung below the leather band, but there was a long slit that left the girls entire right thigh exposed, save for a small skirt of mail under the cloth.

Hiccup took a step back and bumped into Astrid's chest. "Uh..."

The girl pointed her blade at him and still did not look at his face. "Look," she sent on with a touch of irritation and a load of boredom. "Ah've bin through enaw trooble wi' ye Berkians, like that Snotlit fellow fa came by. So, please, let's make thes simple." She gestured to a long piece of parchment on the table. "Ye tell me yer name, an' if yoo're on th' list, ye go in. If yoo're nae," she gestured with the knife toward the village, "ye follaw yer Jorgenson friend an' leave." She sighed, pushed her hair back again, and took her legs off the table. "No tryin' tae flirt yer way in. Deal?"

Astrid narrowed her eyes and tried to ignore prickling sensation on the back of her neck. The girl was beautiful. In a seductive, dark, luscious sort of way. This was Hiccup's "old friend"? He had never mentioned her.

"Um..." Hiccup looked back at Astrid.

She could only shake her head and shrug tightly as she tried to puzzle out what in Midgard his failure to mention the girl could possibly \_mean\_.

Hiccup looked back at the girl. "What?"

The girl rolled her brown eyes. "Joost give yer name. Ah assume you hae one ay those," she drawled.

Hiccup looked back at Astrid.

Astrid shrugged again. She could barely understand the girl's accent, and she could understand the situation even less. More than that, she could not understand why \_she did not know about the girl's existence\_. That question irked her more than anything.

Hiccup looked at the girl. "Finna...are you serious?"

The Girl Called Finna (Of Whom Astrid Had Never Heard Mention) held up her hands. "Ah dornt make th' rules. Ah need a name. Yoo're nae on th' list, ye dornt go in."

Hiccup cocked his head to the side. "There's never a list...There's a list?"

"Seems 'at way, doesnae it." She looked up at the sky and tossed her knife into the air and caught the blade deftly between her first and middle fingers. "Name?"

"Um...Ok..." He shrugged. "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock...the Third..."

The girl's head snapped up and she stared at him with wide eyes. Then her eyes narrowed for a moment before widening once again. "Hiccup!" she shouted with a huge smile as she threw her hands in the air, letting the knife slip from her fingers and go spinning through the air, finally lodging itself into one of the massive doors of the Great Hall. The girl then jumped over the table and threw her arms around Hiccup.

Astrid clenched her hands into fists at her sides.

"Hiccup! Gods! It's bin too lang! Wha'...Four years? Ah didnae recognize ye!" The girl said rapidly as she pushed Hiccup back to look at him. "Yoo're so different! Gods, yoo're..." She shook her head.

"I know!" Hiccup replied brightly. "I got tall!"

"Ye got hot," the girl said bluntly.

Astrid clenched her teeth. Who was this girl?

"Oh..." Hiccup said with no small amount of discomfort.

"But jist look at ye!" Finna continued, still keeping her hands on Hiccup's upper arms. "Yoo've got a bit ay a beard comin' in...An' yoo've jist changed so much! Everywhere!"

Astrid's fingers itched to break something and she opened her fists and spread her fingers wide. That girl needed to take her hands off of Hiccup. Immediately.

"An' what happened tae yer leg?" Finna asked as she looked down at the ground. Her eyes snapped up to his face. "Nae, dornt tell me. We've bin hearin' stories. Ah expect yoo'll tell me awl abit thes dragon? What's it called... Nicht Fury? We dornt git those dragons so far Sooth. Different breeds up here. But yer leg! I ken. I've heard th' rumours...battlin' th'..." She closed her eyes and opened them again. "Green Death?"

"Red Death," Astrid snapped.

Finna look over Hiccup's shoulder and blinked, surprised. "Sorry. Didnae see ye." She grinned at Hiccup and then at Astrid. "Auld

friend. Go on in, Hiccup." She turned back to the table and picked up her parchment before wheeling around to look at Astrid.

"Name?"

Hiccup looked at Astrid expectantly.

Astrid had no idea who this girl was or why she had put her hands all over Hiccup, but damn it, that girl was going to know who she was. "Astrid Hofferson," she said through gritted teeth.

"Astrid...Astrid..." Finna inspected her page and shook her head. "Sorry, Ah dornt see ye on th'..." She looked up at Astrid and then at Hiccup, who had merely taken a step back rather than continuing into the Great Hall. "Astrid?" she asked. "She's Astrid? That Astrid?" She looked at the blonde girl. "Yoo're Astrid!" She looked back at Hiccup and wagged her eyebrows suggestively as she said, "She's Astrid..."

Hiccup turned his face to the sky. "Oh, gods..."

Finna leaned in close to Astrid and jerked her thumb in Hiccup's direction. "He used tae gab abit ye awl th' time. Dornt ken if he still does. Havnae seen him in four years."

"Now would be a great time for the ground to open up and swallow me," Hiccup mumbled.

Astrid raised her eyebrows and blinked. Hiccup talked about her? Frequently? Hiccup never talked about this Finna girl. But he talked about her. Or, he had four years prior, but she would take the victory.

"Finally worked up th' guts tae say somethin' tae 'er, Hiccup?" Finna looked at the boy. "Finally got 'er tae look at ye."

Hiccup walked over and grabbed Astrid's elbow. "Right. Thank you, Finna."

The brunette laughed. "Dornt worry. Ah've had mah fun an' embarrassed ye enaw fur one day." She whirled on her heel and headed toward the doors. "Aam gonnæ see what's happenin' in there. Yer dad said he wanted tae ken when ye got back. He said they wooldnae start withit ye, but who knows whit they've bin daein' in th' meantime..." She stopped when she noticed her knife still lodged in the wood. She grabbed the hilt and tugged. When nothing happened, she braced her foot against the door and pulled harder.

Astrid looked up and Hiccup coughed.

"Sorry about Finna," he said. "I had forgotten how...She's a bit...um..."

"Interesting," Astrid finished.

"I was going to say crazy." Hiccup looked down at her and smiled and she could tell that his face was slightly more red than usual. "Rowdy Ruckuses," he offered as an explanation.

"Ah."

Finna finally dislodged her knife, tucked it into a leather hilt at her hip, opened one of the doors, and slipped inside.

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, I haven't visited their tribe for a long time, but they're all..."

"Interesting."

"Right. Crazy." His lopsided grin broadened.

Anger and frustration and happy flutters collided in her chest to form one huge surge of possessiveness. She grabbed either side of his face and pulled him down and roughly pressed her mouth against his.

He let out a small hum of surprise, then leaned into the kiss and brought his hand to her neck and gently ran his thumb along her jaw. She shivered. Gods...the feeling of those sweet, rough callouses against her skin...

Hiccup pulled back. "You're being very physical today," he observed warily.

"Are you complaining?" she asked gruffly. She did not want to talk. No, she did not want to talk at all.

"Well, no, butâ€"

"Then shut up." She pulled him back down and brought her hands to the back of his head, determined to keep him there for as long as possible. His hair was so thick and soft. She combed her fingers through it, relishing the sensation.

"Ah take back whit Ah said. Ye got 'er tae dae mawr than look."

Hiccup pulled away abruptly and Astrid groaned in frustration. She did not care if the girl saw. By all accounts, it was better if the girl saw.

Finna crossed her arms over her chest and raised one eyebrow. "It's abit time. Yoo're gettin' auld."

Hiccup scratched at the back of his neck. "It's not like I'm that...You're older than I am..."

The girl shrugged. "Yoong at 'eart." She jerked her head toward the doors. "They're startin' as soon as ye get in there."

Hiccup looked down at Astrid. "I have to...um..."

"Right." As much as she would have loved to detain him, she knew she had best go home. She had disappeared before anyone else had awoken, and her mother was bound to have a fit over her skipping all of her chores. "Go do your thing."

Hiccup nodded awkwardly and headed toward the doors.

The two girls stood still and stared at each other. Finna looked at



Astrid in a way that made her feel increasingly uncomfortable. It was not a glare or a challenge, or even a look of curiosity. Finna looked at her the way Hiccup looked at his sketches or at things he sought to improve.

Astrid swallowed. She was being scrutinized. Calculated. Measured and held to a hypothetical standard that she could not guess.

"Well," Finna said quietly, to herself, as if Astrid were not present. "Ah ne'ver thought he'd actually manage it. Ne'er thought he'd dae sae well fur 'imself." With that, she turned and followed Hiccup into the Great Hall.

Astrid slowly turned toward home.

Was that a compliment?

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup sat down in a wooden chair next to his father.<p>

Stoick leaned over. "Where were you this morning?" he hissed. "You were supposed to be at the docks." He nodded to the room full of chieftains and heirs.

"Everyone came by before dawn and kidnapped me," Hiccup whispered back.

"And I suppose they forced you to ride Toothless as well?"

"Yes," Hiccup said dryly. His father had either noticed Toothless' absence or had noted an unmistakable black dot in the sky. "They're all monsters."

Stoick sighed. "You know how important it was that you be there..."

Hiccup held up his hands. "Look, blame Astrid. It was all her idea, apparently."

"Ah," Stoick said with great understanding. "I see."

For the past three years, Astrid had been having ideas. Ideas that usually turned out the way Hiccup's ideas had before the peace with the dragons. Every time she had one of her ideas, and every time something unpleasant occurred as a result, her parents and the village would always joke that the girl had been "spending too much time with Hiccup."

Hiccup glanced around the room at all the faces: some familiar, others not. There were chieftains and their children and the occasional second-in-command, all talking amongst themselves. Spitelout Jorgenson sat on the other side of Stoick.

Snotlout had not been invited, but his father had. Hiccup smiled slightly.

"Well," Finna's voice whispered in his ear, "if that's whit goes oan in public, Ah wonder whit happens behin' closed doors."

Hiccup whipped his head around but she was already walking away and sending him a cheeky smile over her shoulder. The comment served its intended purpose, and he blushed furiously. It set his mind working, though. What would happen behind closed doors if they were left to their own devices long enough? He shook his head. He would not think about that. He was not allowed to think about that. Not in public, anyway. Because, of course, he did think about what could possibly happen behind closed doors, but only when he was alone, and there was no fear of revealing obvious and incriminating evidence that he had been thinking about it, no fear of people's noticing a certain interesting bulge that tunics and leggings were not good at hiding.

"Speaking of the Hofferson girl," Stoick began in a louder voice. He was trying to be casual and failing impressively at it as he squirmed like a child in his chair. "I spoke to Boffer this morning."

"Dad!" His father had broached the subject with him before, and while Hiccup had certainly approved of the plan, he had been very explicit in saying that he wanted to wait. He wanted to talk to her first, to make sure that she was fine with it before their fathers went and arranged everything without them.

Stoick held up his hands. "I know! I know you wanted to put it off a bit longer, but Hiccup, it's been understood for three years, for Thor's sake. Everyone's expected it, and if she was averse to it, I'd think she'd have stopped hanging around you by now."

Hiccup groaned. "Yeah, I know, butâ€"

"And he agreed," Stoick said, though that fact was implied by nature of the conversation itself. They would not be talking about it if Boffer had turned down the offer. "It's all been arranged."

"Great," Hiccup mumbled. What would she do? What would she say? Was she even ready?

"The wedding will be about four months from now."

Was she even sure? He was sure he wanted her. He had been crazy about her since he was eight, but did sheâ€"Was it still too early to think about closed doors?

He looked up and almost immediately met Finna's eyes from across the huge table. She raised her eyebrows in a question and he gave her a very solid shake of his head. No. Absolutely not. Finna would not know until after he himself had time to process it. Better still if she did not find out until after the deed was done. He was fairly certain that even the gods had no idea what would come out of her mouth if she heard such news.

Ever since they were five, Finna had been playing a game with herself. A game he assumed was called "How Many Comments Before Hiccup Turns Bright Red." Every time they were together, at every Thing, at every diplomatic meeting or friendly venture, she had seemed determined to top herself, and she always had. She was good at that game. Too good.

"I just thought, seeing as how good things have been since the peace and since you're getting older...Maybe it's timeâ€"

"Right." It was a huge responsibility. Marriage meant that he would spend the remainder of his life with her, if the gods were kind, and he was completely ready for that. Yearned for it, even. But marriage meant other things, like children, and he was not at all ready for that. Surely they would not need to have children right away. Perhaps there were some herbs or something that would prevent pregnancy, since they certainly would be havingâ€œ"

"Quiet down!" Stoick called over the din, and Hiccup was grateful for the distraction; his mind had almost wandered behind closed doors again. Stoick then turned to a huge man sitting beside Finna: her father, chief of the Rowdy Ruckus tribe, hailing from the Outer Hebrides. "Baldi, you called for this meeting. The floor is yours."

The huge man rose as Stoick sat down and tugged at his long, black beard. He wore gloves similar to Finna's but he was dressed in a blue tunic and a large mantle of brown furs. He cleared his throat and grinned. "Well, It's certainly bin a lang time since i've seen aw ay yer faces."

"Where've you been, Baldi?" someone called out.

"You been avoiding us?"

"Let him talk," Stoick called.

Baldi gave Stoick a quick nod. "Most ay ye are frae further North than we are, an' ye probably havnae heard what's bin happenin' oan Albion recently..." He cleared his throat again. "England's bin subject tae invasion since last year."

"Someone's finally taking on those weak Anglo-Saxons," one man laughed. Hiccup recognized him as the chief of the Bashem-Oiks.

Someone else smacked him and Baldi continued, "Mah daughter an' 'er spies have learned a bit abit them."

Finna gave a short, straight-faced nod to the room.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. Finna was running the Rowdy Ruckus spy network? Finna could be stealthy? Finna could be quiet?

"They come frae th' Sooth, far Sooth, past th' brine tae th' sooth a' Albion. From Normanz."

"Normanz..." someone else said. "Wasn't that settled by Vikings?"

"Years ago," another man replied.

"You getting all worked up because some other tribe is hurting you in some raids, Baldi?"

The whole room erupted in jeers and laughter.

"They're nae Vikings!" Baldi protested. "They've abandoned th' Vikin' way. They killed th' Anglo-Saxon king."

The men in the room suddenly sobered.

"They killed King Edward?" someone asked quietly.

"Harold," Finna replied sharply. "Edward died. An' he left th' throne tae his coosin, Harold. An' th' leader ay th' invaders from Norman z killed Harold an' took England fur himself." She slowly rose as her father sat. "They're nae raidin'. They're comin' tae destroy us an' our way ay life."

Hiccup gaped. Finna could be \_serious\_?

"They come an' kill," Finna continued. "Anglo-Sanxons, Celts, ...it doesnae matter. They come tae conquer, in th' name ay their God."

"They only have one?" Hiccup asked.

Finna looked at him with her usual joking demeanor. "Aye, what's wi' that?"

"Taking after the Anglo-Saxons," a female voice said with a slight annoyed edge.

"They've moved fast," Finna added, reverting to seriousness. "An' they've bin bitin' at us noo..."

"What does it have to do with us?" someone called in a drunken slur. Clearly he had been testing the drink that was to be served later.

"I agree. Why bother telling us?"

"You seeking help?" a woman jeered.

"Because their leader is set oan takin' everythin' frae normanz tae Greenland!" Finna shouted.

The room quieted again, but then someone announced, "We can take them! We're Vikings!"

The gathering erupted with cheers and exclamations and reiterations that, yes, they were Vikings. Therefore, by all logical accounts, they were invincible.

"So were they!" Finna cried above the madness.

"Shut up!" Stoick bellowed.

Gradually, the chaos descended into grudging murmurs.

"They're strong," Finna insisted. "They have new weapons, new armur. Strong an' powerful. An' their forces are massife. They might have th' ability tae wipe us awl out, if they complete their primary objectife." Mawr recently, mah spies an' Ah hae learned 'at they ken abit th' dragons. They've captured their own frae Albion, but they need th' one fa tames 'em, coz they dornt ken how."

Every head slowly turned to look at Hiccup, who gulped and looked at

Finna. She was staring at him with the same expression everyone else had, a face full of anticipation and meaning.

He did not want to be at the meeting in the first place, and the current conversation made him even more eager to leave. He needed to get to the forge, to sit down with his sketches, to do something to clear his head. Maybe he would go see Astrid or Fishlegs. Anything but sitting there and hearing that some strong, unknown army was searching for him.

"They'll be comin' fur him so they can build their own army wi' th' beasts on Albion, and use th' beasts tae take th' whole ay th' knoon world," Finna added quietly.

Hiccup would rather be the village screw-up again than know that some massive force was searching for him to fulfill its own desires and destroy his people and life. He watched Finna and waited for a smile to crack her face and for her to declare that it had all been a joke: everything was fine, he would not have to worry about some place called Normanz, and he could get on with his life of peace and joyriding.

But the smile did not come. What came instead was the statement that did not need uttering, since everyone in the room had already realized the implications of the situation.

"Normanz is comin' tae Berk."

**\*\*I...can't believe I finally finished this chapter. It just kept getting longer and longer and longer...\*\***

**\*\*I decided to have the Normans as our main antagonistsâ€"even though the Romans tend to play that role in the booksâ€"due to when the movie takes place: a good 300 years after Viking settlement, which puts us in the eleventh century, long after Rome has fallen. This also places us happily at the beginning of the Norman invasion. Also, due to the controversiality of the existence of Astrid and Camicazi, Camicazi will not be appearing in this. I love Camicazi, I think she's marvelous, but she has not appeared in the movie franchise, and until she does, I will assume that the movie franchise and book series are **\*\*\_\*\*separate\*\*\_\*\***. To maintain the peace and all that. I may reference her existence, though. Haven't really decided. Plus, just for reference, I am placing Berk somewhere around the Faroe Islands.\*\***

**\*\*I debated giving Finna a full Scottish accent, in full phonetics, but then I figured it would be nigh impossible to read, so she has a lovely mixture, a bit more than Gobber, but not too bad, in my opinion.\*\***

**\*\*Historical Disclaimer: The Normans never got as far as the northern coast of Albion, and as far as I'm aware they never even attempted to make a dent in the Inner and Outer Hebrides. But Sweet Baby Thor in a Thunderstorm, dragons exist, so why the Hel not? Also, typically, a Viking boy would become a man when he had passed between thirteen and fifteen winters. For the purposes of my story, however, this monumental age will be sixteen, making Hiccup seventeen. I just need them all a bit older. Vikings also didn't celebrate birthdays, but we're in a magical universe where dragons exist, so I think I can be allowed that liberty as well. Of that note...You know what? Fuck it.**

I'm just going to stop leaving historical disclaimers and leave a huge dissertation on Norse and Norman anthropology as the last chapter. Sounds perfect.\*\*

\*\*Jehan is the Old Norman French form of Iohannes, and should be pronounced Jean, as in Jean Valjean. Normanz is the Old Norman French form of Normandy. Even though I'm not leaving any more historical disclaimers until the end, I will provide Norman translations of words I will be using. I can't very well upload my Norman-English dictionary, now can I? Oh, don't make that face. You know you want one.\*\*

\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. I'm not big on demanding them.\*\*

\*\*And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go pretend to study for midterms.\*\*

## 2. Chapter 2

\*\*Hello, again. I finally finished this chapter. I'm sorry it took so long, but I hope I made up for the wait in length.\*\*

\*\*I am going to start this by saying something so there is absolutely no confusion or ideas that this is yet another love-triangle-fic: I despise love triangles. Unless they work very nicely and are legitimately believable or can be taken out of the plot and we still have something to work with (examples of good love triangles: Hunger Games, Les Misérables; examples of bad, ridiculous, unbelievable love triangles: twilight). Of that note, I strongly believe that Hiccup would never even look at another woman while Astrid is still around, and it would be entirely out of character for him to suddenly start thinking about a girl he has always seen as a friend especially now that he's getting married. Also, any woman who would dare make a move on Hiccup while Astrid is around would end up with an axe in her skull, courtesy of our favourite shield-maiden.\*\*

\*\*Now that I've got that bit out of the way...\*\*

\*\*Much thanks to peacelight24 for being perfectly and wonderfully distracting. And for being a marvelous Beta.\*\*

\*\*Chapter 2: Marriage\*\*

Astrid opened the wooden door to her home and thumped the toes of her boots against the threshold, effectively knocking off collected mud, before stepping through the doorway.

"And where have you been all morning?" her mother asked from her usual place by the fireside.

She closed the door behind her and answered, "With Hiccup."

"Oh?" Gundy Hofferson looked over her shoulder and then back to the pot she was busy stirring. "How is he?"

Astrid raised an eyebrow. Her mother never asked about Hiccup. She had always been more inclined to remark that of course, Astrid had been with Hiccup and to wonder where else Astrid would be and to

question why she had even bothered asking. It was not that Gundy did not care for Hiccup. On the contrary. She liked him a great deal and deeply respected him for playing a central role in ending a three-hundred year war. It was simply that she could always expect that whenever Astrid was gone, she was with Hiccup. And, if truth were known, she was gone far more often than she was at home and helping with general housework. "He's fine..."

"Really?" Gundy banged the wooden spoon against the side of the iron pot. "Just fine?" She bent down and reached into a small bag at her feet and pulled out a handful of small tubers. She stood up and dropped them into the pot.

"Happy, I guess," Astrid added.

Gundy stuck the spoon in the pot and turned around and smiled broadly. "Oh, good. Yes. That's very good."

"Yeah..." Astrid shrugged. "The same as usual, I guess." What was wrong with her mother?

Gundy's smile faltered. "The same as...Oh." She looked back at the hearth as if expecting that the dancing flames would answer a question flitting around in her head. She looked back at her daughter. "I was thinking we should work on some things for your heiman fylgia tonight. Just make a few things you can take with you whenâ€"

Astrid groaned and stomped across the pounded and packed dirt floor to the set of stairs that led to the loft. "I'm going to go air out the furs." She would rather do some mundane task than have that conversation again. When would her mother realize that she just did not want to think about her dowry? It was unnerving and honestly frightening, thinking about the ever-looming prospect of marriage. Possibly to someone she did not even know.

"Thorhalla's already doing them," Gundy said. "Besides! Just a bit? We really don't have much time andâ€"

"\_Mom\_" Astrid turned and looked at her mother. "We have time. It's not like I'm already..." She trailed off and her eyes widened. Everything made sense. Hiccup's awkwardness and avoidance of a question she was extremely curious about, her mother's sudden interest in the boy... "Mom...Whatâ€"

"Your father needs to talk to you," Gundy said quickly in an unusually high voice. "He's out back." She turned back to the pot and made a large show of being very busy.

"Mom," Astrid repeated as her heart began to race. Fear? Excitement? Hope? She was not sure. "Didâ€"

Gundy started humming loudly.

"\_Mom\_!"

Gundy opened her mouth and started singing a honey-sweet lullaby she had often sung to Astrid when the girl had been younger. Only at that moment it was not as sweet as it was annoying.

Astrid groaned and stomped over to the back door. As soon as she had grabbed the handle, her mother said, "Take that bucket there, would you, dear?"

Astrid bent over and grabbed the bucket next to the door and glared at her mother. She did not want to take the bucket outside. She did not want to do any sort of favours or chores until she got answers. But answers were outside, and she might as well take the damn bucket.

She flung the door opened and stepped outside and unceremoniously dropped the bucket beside her. "Dad!" She marched into the yard as the door slammed shut behind her. "Dad!"

Grimefoot looked up from where he sat on a fencepost and took a moment from sharpening a pair of shears to call, "Dad! You're daughter wants you! She looks angry. Mom did a great job hiding everything, I'll wager."

Astrid rolled her eyes and silently thanked the gods that Grimefoot and Thorhalla lived with the family and brought just a little humour into every situation. It had been a kind gesture, staying on to help even after getting married, and she would be eternally grateful that she would stay with her brother for just a little longer.

Until she moved out.

"Dad!"

Boffer walked around a corner of the small barn in the yard and stuck a pair of shears into his belt and picked a few loose pieces of wool out of his yellow beard. "Ah. Yes. Astrid."

Grimefoot snorted. "And I was really looking forward to the surprise on her face."

"Quiet, you," Boffer said sharply. "Astrid...I need to talk to you."

"So I gathered," she returned. If her father was going to say what she thought he was going to say...Was she even ready? She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to look tough and ready, but could not help swiping at her bangs nervously and biting her lips. She was sure she looked ridiculous, all nerves and pretense and anger and anticipation, and Grimefoot's sudden and obnoxious burst of laughter served to confirm her suspicions.

"Um..." Boffer looked down at his hands and anxiously fiddled with a small tuft of wool. "Stoick came by today...to talk...about...well..."

She decided she was ready. Perfectly ready. "If you said 'no,' I swear on the name of every god in the nine worlds that I will never speak to you again."

Boffer sighed and smiled.

Grimefoot let out a low whistle. "Well, I must say, I did not expect you would be this excited."



Astrid raised her eyebrows and smiled slightly. Really? With the way she and Hiccup treated each other in public, how could anyone be surprised by her reaction to the news?

"I mean, if Dad had given his consent to Hiccup, I would have expected it," Grimefoot continued.

Astrid's smile fell. What was he talking about? Her father had...No. No!

"But he definitely spoke to Stoick, and seeing you all excited about it...I'm a little shocked."

Oh, gods. Her mother's concern. Hiccup's awkwardness...He had known. It was cruel and unfair and horrible and it just did not make any sense. She refused to believe it. She felt sick and frightened and she wanted to run. She wanted to grab Hiccup and Toothless and Stormfly and just leave. She wanted to scream that Grimefoot was wrong, to tell him that it was simply impossible

"Grimefoot, go inside," her father barked before looking her in the eye. "I spoke to Stoick."

She felt faint.

"About his son."

Oh. She let out a breath she did not remember holding.

Grimefoot cackled as he jumped off the fence and strolled leisurely into the house. "The look on your face...Worth it!"

Astrid fought the urge to pick up the nearest rock and chuck it at his head.

"You're marrying Hiccup," her father said forcefully as soon as the door was closed. He blinked and added in a softer tone, "If that's alright. I can try to work something out"

"Dad." Astrid smiled. "I told you I wouldn't speak to you if you had turned him down, and you're seriously asking if it's alright?"

Boffer smiled and relaxed his shoulders. "So it's fine?"

"It's great." Astrid furrowed her brow as a new thought occurred to her. "When?"

Her father looked down at his beard and picked out a small piece of white, fluffy wool. "End of autumn. Just before winter sets in."

She nodded. "That's four months away." She smiled at her father. Big and strong and kind, distracting himself with the small bits of white in his yellow beard, trying so hard not to look at his daughter after telling her that he was essentially selling her to another man in four months, trying to keep hidden his terror of letting go of his girl.

Granted, she would not be going far. A fifteen-minute walk up the

hill. Twenty-five or thirty, depending on how bad the ice got in the winter. And he was essentially selling her to Hiccup, which was not a bad situation. Boffer liked Hiccup, he knew Hiccup would be good to her, knew that she would settle for no one else.

She suddenly found swallowing very difficult, and she ran forward and threw her arms around Boffer's middle and buried her face in his beard before the pricking in her eyes could spill over. That big and strong and kind man hugged her back.

"It's four months," he said quietly, assuringly.

She nodded and accidentally breathed a small piece of wool into her mouth. Something poked her in the stomach and she pulled back.

The shears were still in her father's belt.

She pulled the piece of wool off her tongue and said, "You'd better get back..."

"Right." Boffer pulled out the sheers and pointed them at her. "Go see what your mother needs." And then he was gone.

Astrid turned back to the house and hugged herself. She was getting married.

\* \* \*

><p>The meeting had concluded maybe an hour before, but everyone in the room was still talking about the news and the threat that had once seemed a joke, but when backed up by the unbelievable had become a horrible threat. The Bog Burglars had already fled the islands. They were on their way to Iceland when the meeting had been called, a fact that explained their absence.<p>

Hiccup and Stoick were engaged in a topic that looked incredibly deep and important and would be a complete shame and waste to interrupt, never minding the fact that it would be excessively rude. The chief of the Lava Louts, who had surprisingly been very civil, given their tumultuous relationship with the Hairy Hooligans, was arguing with Spitelout Jorgenson. Possibly over the fact that Berk was not a decent ally since they did not keep slaves. Someone behind her was muttering in that funny, clipped accent of the Berkiansâ€"all sharp consonants and short vowelsâ€"that three bottles of the best mead had mysteriously disappeared since the night before, and Stoick was not going to be happy about it. The chief of the Bashem-Oaks was talking to the chief of the Rowdy Ruckuses, asking if he were absolutely positive that no word had come from the Rock Heads since a force of Norman men had marched their direction a month or two earlier. He had friends there, they all did, and it was just so unusual that they would not appear or send word, but he just couldn't believe blah, blah, blah...

And Finna was incredibly bored. Bored of the topic, bored of the same information she had known for months, bored of having absolutely nothing fun to do.

She had arrived anticipating two things. The first, a simple game, should have started half an hour ago. She burned for that game to start. She had been a strong contender for years, only to get beaten

by Gobber or Stoick or her own father every time. But this time, Gobber was not around, and only her father and Stoick stood in her way. And the chances that she would be facing only one of them at the end were extremely high. She had a shot at winning.

The second thing she had anticipated had been ruined by the annoying and unexpected presence of a certain blue-eyed, blonde-haired hussy. He had done well for himself, and Finna would never take that back. She had meant it. From what she had seen on the island and from what he had said, she felt that she could judge that he probably could not do much better. On Berk, it seemed, much better did not exist. The girl was pretty, she allowed, in a very traditional way. A pleasant, round face with a pointed chin. Big, blue eyes. And she was smart. Smart enough to take advantage and do as well as she possibly could for herself. After all, what girl did not want to associate herself with the good-looking, intelligent hero? And the son of the chief, at that. Everyone knew a chief and his family were guaranteed spots in Valhalla, regardless of how they died.

The girl had looked so furious before giving her name. Burning with possession, enraged that anyone would dare touch Hiccup while she was around. She could have been anyone, some girl trailing the hero, some young thing trying to catch a chance at being more than friends. Then Finna had heard the name, and she had realized the implications of the girl hanging around him. A girl who had ignored Hiccup for most of his life, who probably would have treated him with disdain even if he had worked up the courage to talk to her. And there she had been, acting as if she belonged next to him; and there he had been, acting as if it were perfectly natural.

It had infuriated Finna and led her to make a mistake: accidentally letting slip that Hiccup talked about the girl. That look of triumph had crossed Astrid's face, and Finna had known she had to leave. Finna did not make mistakes in conversation. Every comment was calculated, precise, measured perfectly to hit its intended target. And she had missed.

Leaving for a moment to collect her thoughts and returning to a devastating and terrible sight...And that horrible look of victory on Astrid Hofferson's face.

Finna wondered if Astrid had sunk her claws into Hiccup immediately after his heroics or if she had at least attempted the decency of waiting a few weeks so as to not be too obvious.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Stoick moving across the room and she stood up and started walking toward Hiccup.

She could still remember the first time she had heard the name "Astrid Hofferson." She had been nine. She had hated her. She had not even known the girl, she had not needed to. Hiccup had loved her, and that had been all the reason she had needed. Now, she had even more reason.

She slowed her pace as she approached him. He was bent over the table, lost in thought. His brow was furrowed and his green eyes narrowed. It had been four years since they had last seen each other, and he had not changed a bit. He looked different, definitely, but the same habits, the same expressions, the same sarcasm, the same peculiar confidence that no one ever really saw unless they talked to

him and gave him the chance to just be. The same boy she protected from bullies whenever she could.

She saw one of those bullies, the new chief of the Berserks, Dagur the Deranged, moving toward Hiccup with a wicked glint in his eye.

All those times she had fished Hiccup out of frozen ponds. All those times she had pulled him away just before Dagur had unsuccessfully shot an apple off his head with an arrow. All those times she had she had foiled dangerous "game" after dangerous "game."

Deranged was the perfect adjective.

And everything she had done to Dagur in turn. Herbs in his food that would make him sick for days. Snakes in his clothing. Simple things. The occasional besting him at combat. The occasional tying him to trees and leaving him for a few hours before coming back to find him starved and teary-eyed, bending down beside him and whispering various threats. The occasional carrying out those threats.

She stopped a few paces away from Hiccup and crossed her arms across her chest. Dagur noticed her then and froze in his tracks. She raised her eyebrows, sending him a silent challenge, and he dashed away.

It was strange to think that even after four years, Hiccup was still completely unaware of how desperately he needed protecting. How desperately he needed her protecting, though she whole-heartedly wished he merely needed her.

No.

She walked over to the kegs of ale and grabbed two mugs.

In the end, she knew, he had made a choice, and it did not matter at all what she thought. It did not matter that she disapproved of the decision, for it was his to make. It did not matter that she disapproved of the girl, for she was his to choose. Her loyalties ran extremely deep, and Finna knew that in spite of everything—four years, disappointed hopes she would never let herself dwell on or let him realize, the existence of a certain blonde girl—she would protect him as she always had. She would protect him from the soldiers who were hunting him. She would protect him from a nation across the sea. And she would protect him from Astrid Hofferson, if the need were to ever arise.

And if her assessment of the girl was correct, and she was positive it was correct, he would need protecting.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid lifted the small, framed piece of fabric from the board. It was a thin fabric, with thin strings woven just loose enough to allow sunlight to pass through but just tight enough to keep birds and flies away. It was tacked tight to four strips of wood in a large rectangle and served quite nicely when drying fruits. She set the screen on the ground and picked a juniper berry off the board. The light from the sun had drained the colour a bit, but they were almost completely dry. In a few more days, they would be ready. Her mother would store them, and that winter she would use them

forâ€" <p>

Except Astrid would not be around that winter. Because she was getting married. She pressed her lips together to stop the smile that was beginning. She had smiled so much that day already, and her cheeks hurt terribly, and she was afraid that one more grin would break her face. She dropped the juniper berry in the small wooden bowl in her lap and it bounced, seemingly singing the word playing in her mind. \_Marriage.\_

There was that uncontrollable smile. Astrid was certain she had pulled a muscle in her cheek. But she just could not stop. She could not contain the emotion of the day.

She started scooping the berries into the bowl.

She had always known it would happen. She had known since she was old enough to talk that she would get married like her mother had, have children like her mother had. There was no honour in the alternative, no chance of entering Valhalla if she refused to perform her most important role as a Viking woman, no hope of favour from the gods if she were to remain a maiden for the rest of her life. She had always known, and it had only even been a matter of whom and when. And she had hoped for years that it would be Hiccup. She would have put up a tremendous fight had her parents attempted to marry her off to anyone else.

But fighting was unnecessary because she was marrying Hiccup.

She had to find something to be sad about. She was almost certain her face was stuck. She puffed up her cheeks and blew out and bit down on her lips, but her mouth kept twitching, yearning to break into that smile again.

"What are you all happy about?"

Damn Ruffnut. There was that horrible, excruciatingly wide smile again. "I'm getting married," Astrid said with a slight giggle. This was getting ridiculous. She looked up at Ruffnut, who was leaning against a fence post a few paces away. She had a cloth-covered jar in one hand, and she was resting her head in her other.

"Huh." Ruffnut straightened and set the jar on the fence post before jumping onto the fence and sitting on one of the beams. "Considering the look on your face, the man in question would have to be..."

"Hiccup," Astrid finished with a nod.

Ruffnut smirked. "I thought so." She crossed her arms on her knees and leaned forward. "Does he know? Because the last time we had this conversation, we were fourteen and he was unconscious and I'm pretty sure he had no idea you had decided yours and his future."

Astrid actually did not know whether or not he was aware of the situation, but his behaviour definitely hinted at his knowing. She scooped the last of the juniper berries into the wooden bowl and stood up and hugged the bowl to her chest. "He knows."

Ruffnut blinked several times. "Oh. Then you're really...Oh." She

smiled. "Well, congratulations, then."

Astrid knew her cheeks would be extremely sore in the morning.  
"Thanks."

"When is it?"

"Four months from now. Just before winter sets."

Ruffnut nodded. "That's a long time."

Astrid shook her head. "No too long."

"I guess." Ruffnut grabbed the jar off the post and ran her hand over the cloth covering. "You two will be the first ones. Not that we all didn't expect it, but still..." She looked up. "It's weird. It seems like yesterday we were flying for the first time, and now you're getting married, and tomorrow we could all have children..."

Astrid smile finally left her face.

Children.

She completely forgotten about that part. She knew it would happen someday, but she did not feel ready, and she highly doubted she would be ready in four months. She had heard that there were herbs that could help prevent pregnancy; she could always use them for a couple of years.

She hoped Hiccup would be alright with that, not that he really had a choice in the matter.

"Yeah..." she murmured before smiling again. "It'll be you soon."

Ruffnut's mouth fell open. "Oh...I guess..." She looked at the jar in her hand and held it out. "My mom sent me over with this. Spring honey."

Astrid walked over and reached for the jar. She then tucked it under her arm and held her bowl in both hands. "Thanks."

Ruffnut nodded and slid off the fence. As she walked away she called over her shoulder, "All the girls will be coming to you for advice now! You're an old woman!"

"I know!" Astrid laughed. "You will be also, eventually!"

"Congratulations!"

She grinned and turned toward the house. She'd take everything inside, and then maybe take an hour or so to massage her aching cheeks.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup leaned over the table and sighed. War was looming, and would possibly come before he could even get married, if the reports were true. And he trusted wholeheartedly that the reports were true.

He could not quite grasp the fact that he was, in fact, getting married soon, but he would process it later. There was the matter of possible war to attend to first.<p>

"Ye look intense."

He started and looked up beside him. "My dad and I were just talking about what we would do if they were to attack in the next four months..." He made to stand up, but Finna plopped down in his father's chair and tucked her feet under her.

"Got somethin' planned in four months?" she asked pointedly with a familiar gleam in her eye. She grinned her signature grin—"wide and laughing and extremely self-satisfied. She set a mug of ale in front of him and placed a second on the table in front of herself.

Hiccup coughed. "That's just as far ahead as we got..." he lied. She knew. Of course she knew. What else did Vikings plan as far in advance as four months?

She raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She definitely knew, but if he were to say anything, he would never hear the end of it.

When he glared at her, she raised her hands in defeat. "Alright. Ye dornt hae tae tell me. Ah'm jist curious."

He snorted. "You're never just curious, Finna. You are the most intentionally curious person I know." Most of the information she gathered she later used to her advantage. She was the epitome of conniving and quick-witted.

Finna nodded solemnly. "A truer statement has ne'er bin said." She picked up her mug of ale but did not drink. "So whit hae ye bin up tae? Other than th' dragons, Ah mean." She pointed at him. "An' Ah fully intend tae hear th' entire story afair Ah leave, ye ken."

Hiccup sighed and looked up at the piece hanging from the ceiling. Once it had been a gold dragon with a sword through its middle, but after the peace, Stoick had replaced it with a wreath of antlers—"an old gift from Finna's father. "Remember when we agreed that you were never 'just curious' and that you ask every question with some purpose in mind, usually to torture some poor soul with embarrassing information?"

Finna tapped her chin and looked quite thoughtful for a moment. "Ah'm nae so sure we agreed oan th' lest part ay tha'." Hiccup raised an eyebrow and she rolled her eyes. "Fine, ye want mah intentions?" She leaned over and knocked his shoulder lightly with her fist. "Yoo're mah friend, Ah havnae seen ye fur four years, Ah've missed ye, if ye can believe tha', an' now Ah want tae ken how yer life has bin until now."

Hiccup grinned. "Aw, Finna...You missed me?"

She rolled her eyes again. "Ah always miss ye," she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Life's mawr fun when yoo're around."

"For you," he pointed out.

She nodded. "Fur me." She shifted in the seat and rested her head against the back of the chair. "So? Lest time we talked ye were workin' oan some flyin' machine?"

Hiccup looked at the mug of ale on the table. "Oh, that's what you want to know about? Well, I scrapped that. Not much need for it with the dragons, you know."

"Fair point."

He looked at Finna, at those bright, brown eyes that always listened to him when no one else in the world would. A dear friend from his childhood. The sister he never had. "But lately I've been working on this cart that would move itself, but I haven't quite figured out how..." He sighed and looked at his hands. "I mean, I've got the wheels and the steering worked out. Once the wheels are moving I know how to keep them running and how to stop it, but I've been going crazy trying to figure out how to start them without pushing the cart down a hill first." He looked back at Finna. "Like, what if you need to go up? And I was thinking, what if something like a bow could spring it forward...but the wood would probably snap, and I just can't...Sorry." He chuckled. "My dad says I shouldn't go off like that..."

Finna waved the comment aside. "It's fine." She set her mug back on the table. "Ye ken, ye coolds try makin' it out ay metal. Ah've seen some smiths workin' wi' bronze an' makin' it mawr..."

He cocked his head to the side. "But I'm not sure if that's what I...I mean I could always raise the tin ratio and make a more malleable alloy..."

"Mebbe wind it around itself?" she suggested. "Like a snake afair it jumps."

"Yeah...Yeah!" He grinned. "And you'd think, that the tighter its wound the more tension it would hold so it would spring into place with more force giving the cart more speed and distance..." Hopefully it would have enough force to continually propel the cart uphill, since things did have a tendency to roll down. Why was that? Why did things always go down? Why did things always fall to the ground? Why not sideways? Even if they were thrown, eventually things fell straight down. Maybe there was something under the earth pulling them down. And as fall as pulling went, why did waves form? Was something in the ocean pulling and pushing? Maybe Jormungandr, but no stories of the Midgard Serpent said anything about his making waves...

He started when he saw fingers snap in front of his face and heard Finna say, "Hiccup."

He shook his head. "Sorry."

She grinned. "Tha' starved fur someone fa listens?"

Hiccup laughed slightly. "Something like that." He sighed. "Most people just tune me out. Some even walk away."



"E'en \_Astrid\_?" she said with a slight leer.

He smiled. "She's actually one of the few who make an attempt to understand. Usually she gets it." And whenever she did not understand, it was usually because he was doing a horrible job of explaining it. That, or it did not really make sense to begin with.

"Really?" She sounded genuinely surprised, which was unusual. It was a rare occasion when one caught Finna by surprise. "An' how are things here? Wi' th' village."

"Great." He noted her disbelieving look and leaned in. "Really great. Better."

She nodded. "Ah'll bet. Now tha' yoo're th' hero."

He shrugged. That was not the whole of it, though that had certainly helped get his foot in the door as far as having a place went. He preferred to think that people liked him for him. "I wouldn't say that. I just...have things to do now. I have a place." Finna looked away quickly. "What?"

She looked back at him and smiled. "Naethin'."

He smiled back. "What about you? You're heading up the spy network? What's that about?"

She nodded and smiled her signature grin. "Three years now."

He shook his head. "I had no idea you'd be good at that. No idea you could even be quiet."

She shrugged and kept that self-satisfied smirk on her face. "Well, whit was it ye called me again? Curiously someâ€œ"

"Intentionally curious," he finished.

"Exactly. Ahâ€œ"

Somewhere in the room, someone started the old drinking song. It was a simple, lively tune that served a single purpose: to further a game as old as the gods.

\_ "Gods bless the man who gave us drink, \_  
><em>What drowns us in its stink!<em>  
><em>Gods bless the man who gave us ale,<em>  
><em>What keep through wind and hail!"<em>

Finna grabbed her mug of ale off the table and grinned wickedly at Hiccup. He sighed and grabbed his own. The idea of the game was to finish your drink first. It worked like a tournament, people falling out or literally falling down until there were two left. Finna was extremely good at the game. Hiccup was horrible at it.

\_ "And now you boys, make proud your mother, \_  
><em>With ale in one hand and ale in the other,<em>  
><em>Turn to your side and find your brother,<em>  
><em>Challenge him to drink!"<em>

The entire room went silent as men began to drink. Finna immediately started downing her ale and Hiccup rushed to keep up. He had no chance of winning against her, of course, as very few people did, but he would try to muster something.

In a matter of minutes, Finna slammed her mug on the table. Hiccup pulled his away and looked down in dismay.

Still half-full.

Finna frowned slightly as the rest of the room slowly broke into laughter whenever rounds ended. "Yoo're nae fun."

He shrugged by way of apology.

She looked around and noted her father had just lost to Stoick. "Ah'm gonnæ beat yer dad thes year." She stood up with her empty mug so she could go refill it for the next round.

"Good luck with that." No one had bested his father in years.

Finna rolled her eyes. "Well, Ah'm glad ye hæe such faith in me." She walked away and turned around to shout, "Ye watch, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock! Jist ye watch!"

He smiled and took a deep swig of ale. He liked having her back in his life.

\* \* \*

><p>She sat at one of the many long tables, completely alone in the center., as everyone else in the candle and fire-lit room squeezed to the end of the benches and around other tables. No one wanted to sit near her. Even the tavern girl hurried to set a small wooden bowl and mug in front of her before scurrying away, as if terrified that contact would result in contamination.<p>

The girl merely pulled her red hood from around her shoulders and folded it neatly on the bench beside her, looking for all the world as if she did not care.

The observer in the corner knew better. She knew that look. She wore that look every day. She stood up and walked quietly and quickly to the table. She had been taught how to move around without being seen years before. When she reached the bench across from the girl, she sat and slid her legs across the wooden seat and leaned across the table.

"What's in the stew tonight?" she asked as a short introduction.

The girl paused with the wooden spoon almost at her opened mouth. She set the spoon back in the bowl. "Ymma."

The new arrival nodded.

"Cabbage and peas and fish."

"They had carrots last night," the girl named Ymma said.

"They must have run out," the other girl suggested. She lifted the

spoon from the bowl and quickly brought it back to her mouth.

As the girl swallowed, Ymma asked, "Any good?"

"Hot." The girl shrugged. "It's food."

"It's food," Ymma agreed and lifted her hand to get the tavern girl's attention. The tavern girl looked startled for a moment, then nodded and disappeared through a door.

"You keep appearing from the shadows like that and scaring people, they'll start to call you a witch."

"I'm not a witch," Ymma insisted.

"No, but you move as quiet as death. And your choice of religion doesn't help."

The tavern girl reappeared and set a wooden bowl and mug of ale in front of Ymma. She waited while Ymma fished a small coin from her pocket, and with a final derisive look at the other girl, turned and scuttled away.

The sounds of an argument broke out in one corner of the room. Someone laughed too loudly. A drunken man stumbled and fell down while his friends jeered at him.

The girl looked at Ymma. "You shouldn't talk to me in public."

"I don't see why not."

The girl took another bite of her food and swallowed before replying, "I'm a whore."

"And I worship the old gods," Ymma pointed out. "I don't have many other friends anyway."

"We're not friends," the girl said.

"No," Ymma agreed. "We're not friends." She took a bite of the fish stew.

"Because that would mean we knew each other well." The girl shoved a spoonful of cabbage into her mouth.

"Yes. Or that I knew your name."

The girl froze for a second and swallowed. The two sat for several minutes and ate in silence.

Ymma reached for her mug of ale and took a gulp before saying, "You've never told me your name."

"I don't have a name," the girl said shortly before she began shoving food into her mouth.

"Everyone has a name," Ymma said.

"I don't," the girl replied around a mouthful of peas and broth. She swallowed and scraped her wooden spoon along the sides of the empty

bowl. "Never did," she added upon realizing there was no more food with which she could stall the conversation. "Maybe I did, but it was too long ago to remember. It left with my parents, and I'm not even sure I had those." She grabbed her own mug of ale and drank it in one draft.

"Everyone has parents." Ymma pointed at the girl with her spoon.  
"Everyone has a name."

The girl stared down at her mug and finally murmured, "Oswyth."

"Is that your name?"

"No, I just like it." The girl set the mug down and crossed her arms on the table. "I met a traveling girl named Oswyth a few years ago. She was pretty, and I thought her name was too."

Ymma nodded and took a sip of ale. "Oswyth, then. You were at the old monastery earlier, Oswyth."

The newly-named girl looked at her sharply. "Yes."

"On business."

"Whoring business, you mean." Oswyth narrowed her eyes. "Who do you work for?"

Ymma tapped her fingers on the table and smiled. "I think you know."

Oswyth nodded. "The princess on the island. The Viking Lady...What's her name again?"

"Finna."

"Lady Finna."

Ymma shook her head and absently ran a hand through her long blonde hair. "She hates that. Hates being called 'lady' or 'princess.' She says Vikings don't have ladies or princesses."

Oswyth shrugged. "She'll be queen of them someday."

"She says they don't have kings and queens either." Ymma tapped her spoon against the edge of her bowl. What would it be like, living in a world where the people did not have a king? A world where they had a leader, but one who truly cared for and led to meet the needs of the people? A world in which the people had speaking power?

It would be a strange world, she knew. A strange one. Outside of the small population of viking villages, it would never work. Too many people to keep up with, too many names to remember, too many demands and views and needs.

"The Vikings in Norway do," Oswyth pointed out. "They have a king."

Ymma sighed. News did not travel fast except to those trained to receive it, and even though it had been several months, few people actually cared about the comings and goings of kings, or their names

or what they did. They cared even less about the kings of other countries like England or Norway. In fact, Ymma was surprised Oswyth knew about the existence of Norway, since it was so far removed from the coast and their daily lives. "They did. King Harald, then King Harold of England killed him. Then the soldiers' king killed Harold." She did not bother to say which soldiers. Everyone knew. They were the only soldiers around. No one had really questioned their presence, thinking it was just another power struggle. Only Ymma and a few educated persons in town had figured that their proximity meant their people had taken the lands below and that they were about to be subject to yet another conquerer.

"Harald and Harold...Too many Harold's. Can't keep up anymore." Oswyth raised her eyebrows slightly. "So what? The man from Normanz is king of Norway now? Since the King of England killed the King of Norway and all."

Ymma shook her head. "Just England."

"That's weird." Oswyth leaned back and crossed her arms. "English have a new king from across the Ocean. He wants us too, doesn't he?"

Ymma sighed. "He wants the world."

"And MacBeth is still sitting by?" Oswyth huffed. "When will he do something?"

"I don't know." She did know. MacBeth would not do anything. He had been dead for over ten years. Máel Coluim was the king of Scotland, and he was a coward. He had submitted to the Norman king months before.

Oswyth shook her head. "We're Anglo-Saxons living too far North and too far West. We don't belong in Strathclyde. The Scotts took it years ago, the English have been trying, and now the men from Normanz..." She sighed. "I don't even know what's happening anymore. It's too difficult. Keeping up with it all."

Ymma leaned forward. "She wants to know about them. The soldiers from Normanz." She had come for information. She would leave with it. "Their plans, their tactics, their strengths..."

"I don't know," Oswyth confessed. "I don't speak their language."

Ymma cocked her head to the side. "Then how do you know what to do?" The question had nothing to do with the topic, but she was curious.

Oswyth shrugged. "With enough experience, you always know what to do." She scanned the room and jerked her head forward. "See that man there?"

Ymma turned and looked around. There were many men.

"The one glaring at me like I'm Judas himself."

Ah. That one. Sitting next to the sour-faced woman who kept poking him in the arm and saying something that was doubtless a typical

wifely nag.

"He comes to me because his wife won't suck his cock for him. He likes that."

Ymma turned around quickly, immediately regretting that she had asked.

Oswyth's eyes settled on another man, but Ymma did not dare turn around. "So does that one. And that one there." She jerked her head toward the large fireplace to the side. "And that boy sweeping the ashes." She tapped her chin and continued as if she were merely discussing the weather. "The magistrate likes to take a girl from behind, like a dog. The setter likes to hit. Not hard, just a little."

Ymma felt like vomiting. She did not want to know. It was not her business. Though, in all actuality, Finna would probably be glad of the information. Blackmail material, she'd call it.

"The fishmonger likes to be hit." Oswyth scoffed as her tone took a more biting edge. "But in the end, they all just want to stuff it somewhere warm."

Ymma had no idea what to say. "You know your trade."

Oswyth pushed her bowl to the side and became very engrossed in the grain in the table. "She pays you well, the princess?"

"Very well."

Her head snapped up. "Is she looking for anyone else?"

Ymma shrugged. Finna did not discuss the rest of the spy network with her. She had no idea how many others Finna paid, or even what Finna did on her own. The young woman was full of secrets. "I can ask her."

Oswyth traced her finger along one of the hundreds of wood grains and stopped when she came to a knot. "I want to stop knowing," she all but whispered. "I want to stop knowing what they want."

Ymma placed her hand on top of Oswyth's. "I will ask," she assured her.

"I need to get out," the girl explained quietly. "They'll turn on me one day and get all high and might and purge the town of immorality." She bit her lip. "I could hang." She looked at Ymma. "They'll hang you too, if you're not careful. It's just fine for the Vikings, you know, to worship the old gods. They bring trade and protection from bandits in the forest and they convinced the soldiers not to burn this town, and there's not much the people here could do to them anyway, their being so strong and all. But you're not one of them. You're different."

Ymma nodded. She was not a Viking. She was an Anglo-Saxon. Same gods with different names in their different languages, but she belonged to no banners. She was certain the only reason the townsfolk had not killed her for heresy was the fact that she was under the unofficial protection of the princess. "I'll be careful. I'm leaving soon,

anyway. There have to be others who worship the old gods. I'll find them."

"Ah." Oswyth smiled and retracted. "The princess will definitely be looking to replace you, then." She looked at Ymma with wide, desperate blue eyes. "I'm fifteen. I can still learn, though. I learn fast."

Fifteen. The girl acted so much older, Ymma could hardly believe Oswyth was her younger by two years. When had she started selling herself. A brown-haired, blue-eyed, pretty thing, and the world had forced her to grow up too fast. "I was your age when I started working for her."

Oswyth sighed with relief, the news meaning that she might be welcomed as well.

"I'll talk to her. I promise."

"Thank you," Oswyth breathed. She furrowed her brow, clearly racking her brain for information, possibly to give as a gift to a new friend, if Ymma could suppose they were friends. Possibly to prove that she was worthy of the position. "They have two monks. One is old. The other...maybe twenty? At the most. He's got brown hair and green eyes and a handsome face."

"A handsome monk," Ymma mused. "That seems a waste."

Oswyth smiled, and she looked so young, almost innocent. "It is, isn't it? The captain is stodgy, though. Actually a man of honour, if you can believe men like that exist, which I don't." The innocence vanished. "But the soldiers are different. They pay and they talk. The brown-haired one named...Simon?" She nodded. "I think that was it. He talks a lot. Tell her that. He talks when he's happy. He's got a mean voice, but her talks." Oswyth sighed. "I wish I could tell her what he said."

Ymma smiled. "Thank you. I'll pass it on."

Oswyth nodded once more and grabbed her hood. "I need to go. Night's here. I'll be working soon."

Ymma smiled. "Good luck." It felt wrong, saying that. As Oswyth walked away, Ymma turned her attention back to her bowl, which still had a bit of food left inside. She spooned a bit up and stuck it in her mouth.

It had gone cold.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Gods bless the man who gave us drink,<em>  
><em>What drowns us in its stink.<em>  
><em>Gods bless the man who gave us ale,<em>  
><em>What keep through wind and hail."<em>

Hiccup gazed sleepily over the top of his ninth mug of ale as Finna and his father pulled themselves onto a table with the help of about fifty other chanting Vikings. Each was handed two pints.

He grinned. Finna had sworn that she would beat Stoick. But they were both having considerable trouble standing, which was not surprising as they had both been through at least thirty rounds each.

And Hiccup was having considerable trouble keeping his head up.

\_"And now you boys, make proud your mother,\_  
><em>With ale in one hand and ale in the other,<em>  
><em>Turn to your side and find your brother,<em>  
><em>Challenge him to drink!"<em>

Finna and Stoick immediately started in.

All around the room, Vikings broke into a loud, raucous chant of "Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!"

Finna stumbled forward and had to stop drinking for a moment, and some cheered while others shouted encouragements as Stoick continued. Finna started drinking again.

Stoick switched to his second pint, and Finna was not far behind. She dropped the mug on the ground and spread her feet a bit wider as she chugged the ale.

The cheers grew louder and louder as it became clear that this would be a close match.

Suddenly, Finna stopped drinking and pulled the mug from her face and wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. Stoick pulled back a second later and a hush fell over the crowd.

The two stared at each other for a moment before Finna flashed her signature grin—"wide and laughing and extremely self-satisfied"—and tipped her second mug upside down to prove to all the world that it was empty.

Hiccup smiled. Well. She had won.

Stoick's bellowing guffaws filled the hall with a chorus of deafening cheers. All of it was topped by Finna's triumphant laughter as the crowd helped her down from the table.

Stoick shouted something incomprehensible.

Hiccup pressed his hands against the top of the table in front of him. He should probably head home. He would have a headache in the morning, he knew, but he wanted to get into the smithy as soon as possible, and he knew Toothless would hold a grudge for a week if he were to forget his morning flight. He pushed himself up and immediately sat back down. The spinning in his head told him that the best plan was to stay put.

Stoick's eyes rolled back in his head and he promptly fell backwards and hit the table with a loud thud.

Someone grabbed Hiccup's arm and he looked to his side. Finna stood there and slurred something he could understand only because of the situation.



"Yeah!" he shouted back over the loud noise. "I saw! You won!"

She nodded and sank into his father's chair as she was overcome with hysterical giggles. She lay sideways and draped her legs over the chair arm and leaned back so her head was upside down. She blubbered something else.

"Uh-huh." Why was the table so close to his face?

His forehead hit the table as Finna poked his arm. And then someone turned out the lights.

**\*\*And every major POV character has officially been introduced, even if that person has not had a chance at being a POV character just yet. I believe I have eight POV characters, but we've only been inside the heads of five of them. But, as I said, all have been introduced. Let's see if you can guess the remaining three. Goodness, I have a lot of OC's.\*\***

**\*\*I wrote this whole chapter while listening to the Portal soundtracks. And, of course, "Still Alive" and "Want You Gone" several times, because those are delightful songs. Speaking of which, GLaDOS is probably my favourite character in game history. She's marvelous. "Oh. Hi. So. How are you holding up? BECAUSE I'M A POTATO." "It's been a long time. How have you been? I've been busy being dead. You know, after you MURDERED ME?"\*\***

**\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't.\*\***

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*Well...this took forever. But I also was in electricity-free zones off and on for two months, so...\*\***

**\*\*\*\*Also, I almost double the word count with this chapter. Literally. I think I was two-hundred words off or something...But I have a section from every POV character, which explains the obnoxious length. Sorry about that...\*\*\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 3: Twilight\*\***

Hiccup sat up quickly. Too quickly. His vision went black for a moment, and as the world came into focus, he recognized that he was still in the Great Hall. And the earth was shaking.

Ragnarok?

No, just a hundred or so Vikings snoring heavily.

He looked to his side and noted that Finna was not where she had been earlier. Where had she gone? And when? He considered himself an early riser—once he was up, he was up—and the fact that someone was awake before him, for the second time in two days, came as a surprise.

He pressed his hands against the table and pushed himself to a standing position. He did not have a headache, which was an incredible blessing, but he was a bit dizzy, and he felt as if he had

just stepped off of a ship; the ground was far too stable under his feet.

He brought one hand up to his neck and rubbed at a sore spot. Maybe, if it were still dark out, he could get into his real bed and sleep for just a bit longer. He took a couple of steps toward the door.

Ooh, nauseous. "Easy..." he muttered. "Easy..." His tongue felt huge and heavy and dry in his mouth. He was so thirsty...He'd get water when he was home. Slowly, he picked his way around men and women sprawled on the floor and pushed one of the huge doors open.

He immediately regretted it. The sun was so bright. He guessed it was about midmorning, which meant three things: first, he would not be getting any more sleep; second, his eyes were going to burn; third, Toothless would not be happy.

He squinted against the sunlight and brought his hand to his brow to help shield the glare. As he walked back to his house at the top of the hill on the other side of the village, people called out greetings and he returned them with a short wave. The last few steps to his home felt like miles, but he finally reached his front door and pushed it open before stepping into the cool, quiet, wonderful darkness.

He sighed and shut the door behind him and slowly stumbled toward the table. After balancing himself and spreading his hand across the cool wood, he fumbled for and pulled out one of the chairs and lowered himself into the seat.

He had not been sitting two minutes when he heard the distinct sound of a Night Fury jumping through the upstairs window and hitting the floor above Hiccup's head.

Groaning, he dropped his head into his arms as he heard the dragon move across the floor, knocking several things over as he went. Something like metal striking wood filled his ears. Without looking up, Hiccup grumbled, "Toothless, don't climb on the walls. Dad hates coming home to your claw-marks in the wood, and I don't want to sand the boards down again." He sighed.

Damn dragon.

Something thudded near his ear.

He closed his eyes. "And stop jumping into the rafters. One of these days you'll tear this place apart." He rubbed at the back of his neck and yawned. "I'm just going to rest for a bit, then we can go. I promise."

Toothless chirped and gurgled happily and nudged Hiccup's side.

"Yeah. I know, Bud." He brought one hand out from under his head and reached out to scratch just under Toothless' chin. The dragon purred as Hiccup moved his hand around, searching for that one, special spot. After a minute, his fingers brushed over that place where the scales were just a bit softer, right next to the jaw. He scratched hard.

Toothless tensed immediately, and Hiccup smiled when he heard the great dragon crash to the floor. Just a few minutes of rest...

He almost fell out of the chair when Toothless nudged his side with a great amount of force. He sat up and looked down at his friend, who looked right back at him with slitted eyes.

"I should have expected you'd see through that."

Toothless nudged him with his nose again.

Hiccup rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "Well, if you had kept that tail I made you, you wouldn't have to wait for me."

Toothless grabbed Hiccup's sleeve between his teeth.

Hiccup jerked his arm back. "In a minute, Toothless!" he cried in exasperation. "Just give meâ€"

Toothless clamped his teeth around Hiccup's metal foot and yanked. Hiccup flailed his arms as he slid to the side and landed on the floor his head banged the seat of the chair. "Dah! Ow...Toothless!"

The dragon continued dragging him across the floor.

"Whaâ€"Let go of me!" Hiccup reached out and clawed at the floorboards, trying to find some sort of anchor.

Toothless unlatched and opened the door with his tail and kept pulling.

"Oh, no." He latched onto the doorframe as Toothless yanked on his leg and backed down the steps. "Toothless, no." He felt his grip slipping. "No...No!" With one final tug on Toothless' part, his fingers slipped from the frame and he slid forward into the blinding light of day. Toothless dragged him down and the back of his head hit the next step. "Ow." His head hit the second step. "Ow." His head hit the third step. "Ow." He started grabbing at the steps when he remembered that the next level was the stone pathway. "Gah..." He tensed as his head left the last wooden step and fell to the ground. "\_Ow\_"

Toothless released his hold and Hiccup squinted up at the sky as he lay sprawled on the ground. So much for not having a headache.

Toothless grumbled and nudged Hiccup's side again.

"Alright!" Hiccup sat up. "Alright, alright." He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. He was never going to drink like that again. Ever again.

Except for maybe his wedding, when it was completely expected. Because that was definitely happening. His wedding.

He was getting married.

In four months.

To Astrid.

Did she know yet?

Oh, gods.

He suddenly needed to lie down again. But as he slowly sank back to the ground, Toothless came behind him and blocked his back with his head and pushed against him.

Hiccup sighed and wondered if he would ever have the time to process his near future. "Alright, Bud." He stood up and arched his back. "I'm coming." He felt Toothless push at his prosthetic and he fell over. "Hey!"

Toothless opened his jaws to bite at Hiccup's metal foot again, but the young man pulled back.

"No...I got it." He walked over to the dragon and knelt down to adjust the saddle straps. He had forgotten to take it off the day before, and it had slipped during the night. "You're so needy," Hiccup drawled. "If Toothless is unhappy, everyone's unhappy. Is that it?"

Toothless turned his head towards Hiccup and made a sort of laughing noise: deep and pharyngeal and barking and caustic. Hiccup mimicked the noise back at him and grinned.

He stood up and jumped into the saddle and clicked his metal foot into place. After adjusting the pedals and ensuring that everything was in working order, he leaned forward and patted Toothless on the head. "We'll have to take it easy, Bud. I'm not feeling so hot right now." "ACK!"

Toothless shot into the sky at a pace a great deal faster than Hiccup had intended.

"Toothless! Slow down!"

The dragon spun several times in the air and dove down.

"Oh, gods. I'm gonna be sick..." Hiccup supposed he finally understood at least somewhat how Astrid had felt on her first flight. He tightened his grip on the saddle and leaned forward.

He had made Toothless wait all morning, and he knew the Night Fury would make him sorry. The awful and unmistakable symptoms of a hangover would wear off eventually. He might as well attempt to enjoy the ride, which would not be easy with his stomach threatening to spill out of his mouth.

\* \* \*

><p>"In nomine Patris, et Fili, et Spiritus Sancti, Amen."<p>

Jehan opened his eyes and waited for the Captain to take bread and water first, as was polite. It was entirely uncustomary to take bread in the morning, but the Captain had mentioned eating with Jehan and

Brother Martinus, and as the older monk had pointed out, who were they to refuse him? So the Brother had invited the Captain to the small room the two men shared, to dine at their small table. They did not have much to offer, but the Captain was gracious.

"I must thank you for letting me partake in your fast breaking."

Brother Martinus inclined his head. "You share with us your food. It is only right, then, that we share our company if you desire it."

"I do appreciate your company," the Captain said. "The calm and peace here is much welcomed. I do admit that I tire of the company of my men. Mere boys, they are. Conscripts and young volunteers who have no concept of the terrors of battle. They wish for excitement. They do not know what they ask."

Jehan did not feel that war was a pleasant topic while eating, but he remained silent. He knew he had a tendency to speak before thinking of how his words would be received, and he had recently been trying to work on that small flaw.

"I have informed His Grace," the Captain mentioned, "and he agrees, that the Vikings would be better allies than enemies." He broke his piece of bread. "They are powerful."

Jehan wished he could see them, the powerful Vikings to the North. The ones to the West were lean and rarely seen. But he had heard rumours of giant ships and men who rode powerful dragons. Stories of massive temples and mighty seas and towering mountains. Talk of God's creation—"imposing and incredible. As much as he wanted to share the word of God, he wanted to see those things more, and he was incredibly disappointed that he would not be.

He tore off a part of the loaf of bread and poured himself some water.

He had been preparing that morning, packing three books that had been given to him upon becoming a novice, when word had come that the company would not be traveling further.

"Perhaps, then, we might be able to bring the Good News to the lost by way of treaty," Brother Martinus, ever the evangelist, offered.

The Captain nodded slowly. "Yes, it is my desire as well. Besides, we must take a stand in England and Scotland and quell all rebellions before we can think of how to proceed." He took a bite of his bread, chewed, and swallowed. "If we lose our political footing, we lose all ability to move forward with God."

"I always thought that the Lord meant us to carry the message into all the world, in spite of political backing or stability."

Both men looked at Jehan, and after a moment he realized that the words had come from his mouth. Embarrassed, then, and slightly disconcerted under the chastising gaze of Brother Martinus, he decided he might clear up what he had just said. "I mean...I always supposed that He provides stability and safety, not the powers of men." Perhaps...not the best phrasing.

Brother Martinus leaned over, "Show respect." He looked at the Captain. "I do apologize. He is but a novice, only nineteen."

The Captain waved his hand and smiled slightly, a marked improvement in his typically dour appearance. The small grin made him almost handsome. "It is quite alright. It has been a while since I last spoke with a young man who had a good head on his shoulders and could speak for himself." He folded his hands on the tale. "Tell me, Novice Jehan, do you believe war can be used as God's tool?" He cocked his head to the side. "A controversial and theological question, I understand."

Jehan thought for a moment and chose his next words carefully. "I believe He commanded his people into battle, but I also believe that the coming of Christ renders battle useless." He glanced at Brother Martinus, who nodded with pride. "All efforts should be focused on love and peace." When Brother Martinus raised his eyebrows, he added, "Sieur. If I'm not overstepping myself."

The Captain hummed softly. "And is that why you took this mission? To spread love and peace?"

Jehan nodded. He saw no reason to lie to the Captain. He was a good man, stoic and set in the ways of knighthood and valour, but good. "And to learn about the world, Sieur. Knowledge."

The Captain shook his head. "Wisdom, my boy. Knowledge can be learned from books, but wisdom is gained only with experience." He took a long draught of water. "Peace and wisdom are worthy pursuits. Do you read much?"

"He pours over everything he can find," Brother Martinus said with a broad smile. "He is very bright."

"How I wish my men were like you, Novice Jehan. Have you been learning about this country?"

Jehan bowed his head. "I have walked in the village, but...I wish to know the language, Sieur. I cannot speak it."

The Captain smiled. "I have managed to acquire some tomes in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, particularly some books of the Bible. You may help yourself to them, if you like."

Jehan took a sharp breath. The Bible. He and Brother Martinus had brought from the abbey three epistles of the apostle John, as well as his gospel, one of Paul's epistles to Corinth, and the Acts of the Apostles. He could learn by comparison. "I am deeply grateful, Sieur."

"Perhaps we could send you to learn the language of the Norsemen on the islands to the west of us." The Captain picked up his cup. "You could act as an emissary of the King and of the Lord."

Jehan looked down at his hands. He wished he could be with the Norsemen beyond Scotland, beyond Albion. He knew the chief of the Vikings to the West had made an arrangement after their arrival: the Norsemen would not attack if they and the town were left alone. He had caught glimpses of them. A slim people who blended with the trees

when they were not conversing cheerily with the people in the nearby town. Whenever he or anyone else got close, though, they disappeared, seemingly far more content to watch from the shadows of the wood.

He suspected that they did not trust the Captain, even though he had honoured the agreement, and that they waited, ready to defend themselves and the village.

"That would indeed be a great honour," Brother Martinus said.

But the North...Those were men with ships and command of the seas, men whose trade routes were said to expand even further west than Byzantium, even further south than the Moorish lands in Iberia. They were men with knowledge of the world, more knowledge than all of that held in Rome. But they were great for another reason, a reason that made his blood run hot and cold at the same time; those men had conquered dragons.

"I have been looking for someone to stay by my side when we go," the Captain replied. "If he is willing, I am quite serious about this. He is levelheaded and willing, I think."

"He will not disappoint, I'm sure."

What sort of might did those men have? What sort of great strength could possibly subdue the powerful beasts of legend?

The North...They should have started moving that morning. He had even packed what few possessions he had.

"You seem distant, Novice Jehan," the Captain said.

Jehan looked up at him. "Oh, no, Sieur." He took a deep breath. "I just...I thought today we'd be headed north to the Norsemen above, yet we're still here."

Brother Martinus leaned across the table. "Forgive him. As he says, he wishes to travel and know."

"There is naught to forgive," the Captain answered with a shake of his head. "Disappointment is a hard blow to bear, especially for one so young." He looked at Jehan with a kind smile, and the young man started to imagine the Captain at home. He was a man, hair greyed and smile soft, who should be at home with a grandson on his knee, not fighting a war. "To answer your concerns, I received word at daybreak that a different convoy will be headed north. They are taking their own ships from England, which will save a good deal of time. These men will negotiate a peace treaty with the Northern tribes, specifically with the tribe from which the dragon tamer hails. Only after these negotiations have been made will we as a company travel to speak with the dragon tamer himself and learn from him. And after we have captured our own dragons, of course." He looked at Brother Martinus. "That is when the two of you will bring the gospel to the heathens."

The dragon tamer. He was said to have bone-crushing strength and the ferocity of a lion. "We know where he lives?" Jehan asked, his heart pounding in excitement.

"It is rumoured to be a small place, an island of little

consequence." The Captain nodded. "Yes, essentially we do."

"Why do we need the dragons so desperately?"

"Strength and power," the Captain answered. "There is peace in respect, and respect is gained through power."

Jehan bit his lip to keep from saying something he would regret. Christ had gained respect not through power, but through kindness and love. Then again, kindness and love had so upset the world that He had acquired many enemies as well. But power also came with enemies. Jehan, for his part, could not see an advantage to power beyond the petty concerns of kings and principalities of men. "I see."

Brother Martinus quickly asked, "Do you have a family, Sieur?"

Jehan was grateful that the older man had the wisdom to change the subject, else the conversation would have led someplace that would have landed Jehan in trouble.

"I have two daughters with my first wife," the Captain answered. "They are the joy of my life. My second wifeâ€œ"

But Jehan was not to hear about the Captain's second wife, for a shout interrupted him.

"They're back!"

"They've got one!"

The Captain stood abruptly. "Please, excuse the interruption." He strode from the room.

The outburst could mean only one thing: the small group of soldiers sent to capture a dragon weeks before had finally returned.

The young novice looked at his mentor, and the older man nodded and rose with seemingly as much excitement as Jehan felt.

They hurried after the Captain. Jehan had heard stories of dragons from travellers who had stayed at the abbey. All stories, of course. As civilization, and particularly Rome, had moved across the land, man had pushed the dragons further west and further north. Not until arriving in England so many months before had he seen a dragon. There were a few to the South, all different colours and small like cats, but the larger ones dwelt in places unconquered by great empires. That was why they had come so far north, so far beyond the reach of His Grace, King Williame, and so far beyond the extension of the Roman Empire and Hadrian's Wall, so close to the Antonine Wall. Though large dragons were scarce in Scotland, they did exist.

He had heard tales of the dragons even further north, the dragons that the Vikings had tamed. He had heard that they were massive.

He wanted to see a large dragon. Here was a chance.

The Captain opened the door that led into the courtyard and the small party stepped into sunlight just as a large cart pulled by eight oxen trudged through the gates.



On the back of the cart sat what appeared to be a shaking and breathing box covered in a large canvas sail. A cheer rose from all the soldiers stationed in the yard, and more appeared from the makeshift barracks to join in the revelry.

Jehan saw Simon nudge another soldier and make a comment while gesturing toward the cart. Both men laughed.

The man driving the cart pulled a set of reins and the oxen stopped. He jumped off the seat and approached the captain as the men accompanying the cart came to a halt.

"I thought you would have moved out by now, Sieur."

The Captain shook his head. "There has been a change of plans. Another company will be attempting negotiations with the Norsemen." He looked at the cart. "Let's see it, then."

"Yes, Sieur." The man turned to the small squardon around the cart. "Off with it."

The men turned and, as one, yanked away the large, canvas sail.

Jehan held his breath as his eyes took in the sight.

An enormous, green beast was held in a cage that rattled with each movement the dragon made. His huge claws scratched and pulled at the metal bars and smoke flared from his nostrils. Giant, yellow eyes scanned the crowd, as if the dragon were looking for his first meal, and a long tail with spines to match the dragon's head whipped out of the cage.

The men started cheering, and Jehan could swear he heard a familiar voice call, "Not so powerful now, is he?"

Here was a dragon. A creature the size of three horses, at least. A mighty beast, trapped in a prison.

Suddenly, the whole affair seemed sad. Jehan began to feel sick as he inspected the dragon closer. Its wings were not tucked because it could not take flight, but because they were pressed to its side by the close bars. Part of the wing webbing was trapped under the dragon's foot. Its head was bent uncomfortably low because the ceiling of the cage pressed upon its neck. The muffled bellows and growls were not those of aggression, but those of fear and pain. And the screams were muffled because of a great strap of leather wrapped and secured around the head to prevent the dragon from releasing flame.

Jehan did not care that the dragons were representations of the Enemy of the Lord. He did not care that the mouth of a dragon was the rumoured doorway to the Lake of Fire. He knew only one thing in that moment.

"This is wrong," he murmured.

The Enemy could not create, only the Lord could. And until the Enemy became a dragon, all creatures were God's creatures.

The Norsemen had tamed dragons. Whether they had befriended them or conquered them remained up to the storyteller's interpretation. Jehan, however, however found himself hoping that the former had happened. That one could befriend a dragon as one could a horse or dog.

"This is wrong," he repeated.

But he knew there was naught he could say. He would be crazy to suggest showing kindness to a creature so reviled and feared. Nevertheless, he wondered if there were someone that crazy in the world, someone with the insanity to show kindness to and to make friends with a dragon.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid knelt down next to the board and scooped a few juniper berries from her bowl. The sun was getting higher and warmer, and it was just hot enough to lay out the berries again. With the palm of her hand, she pushed them around so they were separated and then pulled a few more from the bowl.<p>

She yawned and opened her eyes wide, trying to get rid of the tiredness. She had hardly slept due to the excitement from the day before.

Married.

She grinned sleepily and dumped the remaining berries on the board and pushed them around a bit.

Married.

Just before the winter.

Gods, it was a strange thought.

She dropped the bowl and grabbed the cloth screen and placed it over the board and stood up. She reached toward the sky and arched her back.

When would the handsal be made? A few days? Most likely after the last of the visitors had gone and Stoick and Hiccup did not have to play host any longer. Maybe then. Knowing Hiccup, he would probably get so nervous he'd stumble over a few of the words. Would that mess things up? Would getting something wrong make the vow void? It did not matter. She would marry him anyway.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a very distinct and inhuman scream—a scream she knew just as well as she knew the one who made it and almost as well as the one who rode him.

Astrid looked to the sky just as a black spot rushed by, gone in an instant. She smiled and sighed. Years ago she had promised herself, but it was no longer a promise. It was a fact.

She was going to marry that man.

"Good mornin'."

Astrid jumped and turned around and saw the last person she would ever have expected. Curves in all the right places, beautiful face turned upward, smile wide and laughing, brown eyes watching where the streak of black had gone.

She found herself too shocked to respond. When had Finna arrived? Astrid was quite unused to people's sneaking up behind her, and the fact that Hiccup's dear old friend had been the first in years to do so made her feel incredibly uncomfortable in a way she had not felt since the dragon raids.

Finna looked at her and grinned. "Back home, we say tha' ye can always tell how a man is in th' sack by lookin' at how 'e rides his horse." She looked back up pensively. "Ah wonder if th' same can be said abit a man an' his dragon."

"I wouldn't know." Astrid bent down and picked up the wooden bowl she had dropped. The comment irked her. It was not Finna's place to wonder. It was hers, and hers alone.

Finna laughed merrily. "Ay course nae. but findin' out is jist one mawr thin' ye can look forward tae."

Astrid decided that she did not like Finna's laugh. It was too high and merry and sounded too much like bells. Annoying, high, cheerful bells. "Did you need something?" she asked harshly.

Finna held up her hands and raised her eyebrows, obviously taken aback by Astrid's tone. "Ah jist want tae talk," she assured her.

Astrid narrowed her eyebrows. That made one of them. "Talk."

Finna shrugged. "Ah've bin hearin' yer name fur years, an' Ah jist want tae ken if everythin' Ah've heard is true." She smiled sweetly. "Ah'm jist curious. Ah've ne'er bin tae Berk afair, an' Ah'm interested in th' folk an' th' places...can't blame me fur tha' can ye?"

Astrid shifted her weight. Perhaps she had been too quick to judge. It would not have been the first time she had made a mistake about a person. "I suppose not." Hiccup clearly trusted Finna. Astrid decided it should be enough reason to trust her as well.

"An' Ah wanted tae congratulate ye," Finna continued.

"On?"

"Yer approachin' marriage, ay course," the brunette woman replied.

Astrid smiled. "Hiccup told you."

Finna put her hands on her hips. "Nae, he's probably afraid ay whit Ah might say." She laughed. "Nae tha' Ah blame 'im! Ah'll be th' first tae admit tha' Ah'll make fun ay anyone fur anythin'! Ah figured it out in mah own ways." She met Astrid's gaze and held it and said in a deeper tone, "Naethin' goes oan in thes world without mah knowin' abit it."

Astrid did not like the way she said the last bit, all dark as if it were some sort of threat. "You didn't know what the dragon was called," she pointed out. "The one he killed." She did not know why she said it. She just needed to challenge the other woman, to prove she knew something Finna did not.

Finna waved her hand. "Wee details get lost. But everythin' important...it was huge. Th' size ay a wee island. It was controllin' awl th' others, an' once it died, th' dragons stopped raidin'." She held out her arms. "Enormous wing span, an' he took it down frae th' inside wi' fire." She smiled slightly. "Nae one had e'er thought ay tha'. It was clever."

"Yes." Astrid mentally slapped herself. She was getting petty. "He's very clever." Only a few seconds before she had decided to trust Finna on Hiccup's judgement. She decided she should at least try to befriend her.

"He always has bin," Finna agreed.

Astrid did not like that. It sounded like Finna was implying that she had known Hiccup longer, that she knew him better. She took a deep breath. Of course, Finna probably had not meant it that way. Astrid supposed she was being overly territorial. "You've been his friend for a long time."

"Awl 'is life."

There it was again. That feeling of being threatened in a way she did not quite understand, that feeling of being put down in a very underhanded way. Astrid did not want to talk anymore. Finna made her very uncomfortable. "I should get back toâ€œ"

"Can Ah ask ye somethin'?" Finna interrupted.

Astrid nodded.

Finna cocked her head to the side and brushed her hair back. "Whit dae ye see in 'im?"

She furrowed her brow. Strange question. It was one that would normally be discussed between close friends, not strangers. "You're the one who's been his friend all his life."

Finna rolled her eyes. "Ah ken whit \_Ah\_ see. Ah'm askin' abit \_ye\_."

Astrid took a deep breath. "I see..." She shrugged. "\_Hiccup\_. I see him for who he is. I seeâ€œ"

"Funny tha' ye didnae see it afair," Finna commented dryly with a small smirk.

Astrid took a step back. "Whaâ€œ"

"Nae too lang ago, Ah was one ay th' only ones fa actually saw 'im," the other girl mused in a very nonchalant voice that Astrid refused to believe. "While th' rest ay th' world thought 'e was useless...his tribe, his own faither...Ah was one ay his only friends."

Astrid had not been named, but she understood the implication. Only an idiot would have missed it. Forget trust and trying to befriend. She decided that if Finna wanted to be underhanded, she could. She would match her. She could be underhanded. "Things have changed. He has friends here." There. Imply that he did not need Finna anymore. "He's respected. He's a hero andâ€"

"Och, aye," Finna said sweetly as she met Astrid's gaze. "How fortunate fur ye."

Astrid narrowed her eyes. Finna could say whatever she wanted about those four years; Astrid would not deny any of it. She could not deny any of it. But she would never tolerate the implication that she had taken advantage of his status, not when it was not even true. "It didn't happen that way," she stated. Underhanded was not really her style, anyway.

"Didnae it?" Finna asked as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Astrid mimicked the pose and spread her feet. She was mentally and physically prepared to fight, to intimidate. She knew how to attackâ€"attacking was her specialty. "You don't know me. You don't know the first thing about me."

Finna grinned and leaned in. "Och, nae, Astrid Hofferson. As Ah've said, Ah've always bin friends wi' Hiccup. Ah ken everythin' abit ye."

Astrid lifted her chin. "Really?" Her heart began pounding when Finna uncrossed her arms. In Astrid's experience, releasing a guarded stance meant only one thingâ€"Finna thought she had some sort of advantage; she thought she could win.

The other woman held up a finger. "Ah ken tha' ye prefer tae face things head-on, as ye are right now." She held up a second finger, ticking off as she spoke. "Ah ken ye prefer things said plainly, tha' ye prefer tae make yer thoughts perfectly clear. Ah ken tha' when ye were eight, ye climbed yer first tree. Ye ne'er had afair coz ye were afraid ay heights, but he taught ye how. Ye stopped bein' afraid 'at day. As ye were climbin' down, ye fell oan top ay him an' scraped yer hands." She looked down at three raised fingers and then looked at Astrid. "Did Ah get anythin' wrang?"

Astrid wanted to ask how Finna knew, but the answer was obvious. Hiccup. "No."

Finna nodded and held up a fourth finger. "Ah ken tha' when ye were nine yer brother...eh...Grimefoot, right?" She shrugged, and Astrid wanted to scream at how wrong it was that Finna knew who her family was. "Anyway, he started showin' ye how tae flin' an axe. Ye waur awlready fine at wieldin' them, an' he had decided tha' ye had graduated." She chuckled. "When ye threw fur th' first time, Stoick jist sae happened tae be walkin' by, an' ye nearly took his head clean off. But ye quickly got better."

It was wrong. Not wrong that Hiccup had obviously told stories and memories, and it was not wrong that he had told Finna, but it was incredibly wrong that Finna knew. It was wrong that she knew and probably knew so much more. "Stop it."

Finna raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Why? Coz Ah'm right? Coz Ah ken sae much abit ye an' ye ken absolutely naethin' abit me?"

Astrid ground her teeth and said nothing. Finna was perfectly right. Astrid had learned from her brothers that she should always know more about her opponents than her opponents knew about her. That was why she studied dragons before going into the ring, why she had read the book cover to cover multiple times, memorizing basic tactics and common maneuvers. Never had she been in the position of the enemy, having to guess at the attacker while the attacker had so much knowledge. She felt truly scared. She was trapped in a fight with no understanding of where it could possibly lead or how she could possibly win.

Finna held out her thumb. "When ye waur ten, ye stopped hangin' around heem. ye finally figured it 'at he woods hae held ye back frae becomin' th' greatest dragon fighter ay yer age, 'at he micht hae tarnished yer reputation."

"Stop it," she repeated with more force. Hiccup would not have known that. He should not have known that. Maybe he had figured, but she would never had said such a thing to anyone. She had never mentioned him, and if anyone had ever brought up how they had used to always be together, she would just shrug and say they had grown apart, which was mostly true, since she had embarked on the path of a dragon fighter and he had started working with Gobber. Very different trades, very different circles. No one else had ever questioned it. Hiccup had never questioned it. So how did Finna know her every thought? It was wrong.

"Ye probably ne'er said a kind word tae him," Finna added. "Probably ne'er said anythin' beyond askin' 'im tae dae a bit ay smithin' fur ye. Did ye e'en see 'im as human?"

She balled her hands into fists at her side. "Stop it!" How would she know that the first time they had spoken in years had been when Astrid had asked Hiccup to sharpen an axe? Hiccup had not left the island since then. She could not know. She could not.

"Did ye e'en ken whit he looked like?" Finna asked.

Astrid's eyes widened. How? How could she possibly suspect that until three years before Astrid had not even known what colour his eyes were? She figured that a rabbit caught in a trap must have felt the way she felt at that moment. No way to deny that she had almost completely forgotten his existence. How did Finna know her insecurities, things she still felt guilt for? How did she know so much personal information she could use in an attack? And how in Hel had Finna attacked with so much precision that Astrid could do absolutely nothing?

Finna scoffed. "Ye didnae, did ye?" She smiled sardonically as a fire burned in her brown eyes. "But e'en when nae one cared abit 'im, he still cared abit everyone else. Ye barely noticed 'im, but he noticed ye," she said with a sneer.

Astrid felt her shoulders relax slightly as realization washed over her. She was not losing at all. She was winning. In fact, she had already won. She had won a war she had not even realized she had been

fighting. And Finna was furious about it, furious that a girl who had ignored him had won while she had been his friend all along. In a fair and perfect world, it would have been Finna marrying him, it should have been Finna marrying him. But the gods were not fair and perfect, and that was precisely why they were gods. They chose the ones they favoured, and in that situation they had very clearly favoured Astrid. But she would never pity Finna for it. She would never pity her for losing. "You said he talks about me."

Finna rolled her eyes. "Ay coâ€"

"But he never mentions you."

Finna shrugged the jab off. "Sae yoo've ne'er heard ay me. Yoo've probably ne'er heard ay Camicazi or Tantrum or anyone in his life away frae Berk." She put her hands on her hips and leaned forward. "Sae, may Ah ask, how much dae ye really ken abit 'im?"

"Enough," Astrid snapped. "And you realize that's all you are and all you'll ever be: his life away from Berk. And by tomorrow, you will be gone, away, with your tribe, and I will be here. With Hiccup." It was cruel, she knew, dancing on a victory and rubbing the truth in Finna's wounds, but she did not care. Her situation, her victory, was completely secure, and no matter how hard this girl tried, she would never take him. "Getting ready for my marriage. To Hiccup. And you will be one more person that he knows. Just a girl away from his home and his family and his wife."

"Ye think Ah dornt realize tha'?" Finna asked with a slight break in her voice.

Astrid shrugged. "I just thought I should make myself 'perfectly clear.'"

Finna stepped forward and bent over slightly so that their noses were almost touching. "Then allow me th' privilege ay makin' myself 'perfectly clear,'" she hissed. "Yoo're smart, an' yoo've figured out some things. But let me tell ye tha' Ah am extremely loyal, an' if ye e'er hurt 'im, Ah will personallyâ€"

"Astrid?"

She knew that voice. That nasal mumble that made her feel like laughing. And everything else suddenly seemed like nothing when she thought about that voice.

Oh, gods...She was going to marry him. She was going to wake up to that nasal mumble every day. In light of that wonderful, marvelous fact, Finna meant absolutely nothing to her. "Hiccup!"

He rounded the corner of the house and flashed that crooked grinâ€"she was going to wake up to that crooked grin every day. His face was slightly red, wind-chapped from flying, and he was preoccupied with combing his fingers through his hairâ€"she was going to be able to run her hands through that hair every day. "Your mom said you'd be..." He stopped upon seeing Finna, who had her back to him and was looking at Astrid with a very confused expression. "Oh, hey!" he said cheerfully.

Finna smiled wide before turning around to face him. "Hello!"

Astrid grinned back at him. Gods, he was right \_there \_and she knew about the wedding and she could not figure out what Finna's expression had meant but it did not matter because she was marrying that man and his nasal mumble and crooked smile and bright green eyes and thick hair and calloused fingers and awkwardness and sheer brilliance...Sweet Freyja. All those wonderful, lovely things that she really liked rolled up into one man that she truly \_loved\_.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Finna gestured between herself and Astrid. "We were jist talkin'."

Astrid suddenly noticed his eyes were red and that he had shadows just beneath his eyes and that he still had not shaved. "Long night, Hiccup?" she teased gently.

He rolled his big, bright green eyes. "Ugh. I don't even want to talk about it..."

Finna laughed. "Ye didnae e'en hae tha' much!" She turned to Astrid and jerked her thumb toward Hiccup. "Hae ye e'er seen 'im drink?"

"I'm right here," Hiccup grumbled as he crossed his arms and twisted his face into a scowl.

Astrid found Finna's sudden change incredibly disturbing, jumping from nearly threatening her to being her best friend in a matter of seconds. A person should not be able to change so quickly. But if Finna wanted to play it that way, fine. She could play it that way. "I know!" She grinned back and held the other girl's gaze. "He can't hold anything!"

Finna lifted her eyebrows slightly as an understanding passed between the two of them: Hiccup's presence had not called a round of peace. The contest for whomever knew him better continued.

"Ah mean, he's gotten better. When we were younger, he cooldnae e'en take mead! He'd pass out o'er a single mug!"

Hiccup threw his hands in the air. "Alright, sure. Let's all start making fun of me now..."

Astrid faked a small laugh. "You don't have to tell me! When he was still recovering from his leg and all, we'd only have to give him a little and he'd be sleeping like a baby!" There. Finna might have known him years ago, but that was a part of his life to which only Astrid had been privy.

"Am I the only one who doesn't find this amusing?" he asked.

Finna put her hands on her hip. "Doesnae surprise me in th' least."

Hiccup groaned. "I'm starting to seriously regret your meeting each other..."



Astrid smiled widely at Finna and Finna smiled back at her. Oh, he had no idea.

Finna turned to face Hiccup. "Astrid was jist offerin' tae take me oan a tour ay th' island."

Astrid kept that smile plastered to her face. No. No she had not.

Hiccup's face brightened, and the dark circles under his eyes nearly vanished. "That's a great idea! We should all go!"

Well, she would certainly have to work to keep her cool while Finna was around, and she honestly would have preferred being alone with him, but spending time with Hiccup was spending time with Hiccup. She was not going complain.

"An' Ah'd love tae learn tae fly a dragon too!"

Astrid sucked in a quick breath. Finna had just changed the rules of the game.

Hiccup nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! I just unsaddled Toothless, but I'll get him ready. You can ride with me."

No, she could not. That was Astrid's place. It always had been, since her very first flight. No one else ever rode behind him on Toothless. Only she did, and that was only when Stormfly could not fly for whatever reason. And the fact that she was completely certain that Hiccup belonged to her until death did not mean that she had to be completely understanding when some other woman had her arms around him while they flew through the sky.

Not at all.

"He's not too tired?" Astrid asked. Toothless had just been out, she had seen him, so it was not an illogical question.

Hiccup chuckled. "Believe me. I owe it to him." He turned around and started walking away.

"Wait!" Astrid ran and caught up with him before grabbing his arm and jumping in his path.

He looked at her and smiled his crooked smile and her stomach clenched pleasantly.

She wanted to tell him that she knew, that she was happy. She wanted to be sure he knew. But it was not the right time, so instead she asked, "Can we talk later? Just us?"

Confusion swam in his green eyes. "Um...sure?" he said, as if she had asked the most ridiculous question in the world. Which she had. The two of them talked alone all the time.

She wanted to kick herself for being so awkward.

They'd make a great pair. A wonderfully awkward pair.

She slid her hand down his arm and laced their fingers together.

"Good."

He laughed slightly and leaned forward and kissed her lightly.

Ooh...she liked kissing him.

He pulled back. "See you in a bit."

She watched him go and smiled. She loved him. She really did. No one would ever be able to separate them or challenge that fact.

No one.

Astrid turned back around and put her hands on her hips. "You were saying something about hurting him?"

Finna had that strange, confused expression on her face. "Ye love 'im," she stated quietly.

"Of course I do," Astrid replied as she lifted her chin.

The other woman shook her head. "Ah ne'er thought tha' ye might..."

"Maybe some things in this world do slip your notice," she sneered. "Something about hurting him?"

Finna took a deep breath before saying, "Ah'm nae yer enemy, Astrid Hofferson."

Like Hel. "Yes, you are."

Finna shrugged. "If ye like." She furrowed her brow. "But Ah'm nae th' one ye shoold be worried abit." Then she walked past Astrid to follow Hiccup.

What was that supposed to mean? She was not the enemy? She was a self-important, manipulative bitch. She was not the one Astrid should be worried about? Even if she had absolutely no claim to Hiccup, Astrid would worry about her until she left because Finna was going to drive her insane.

She started jogging to catch up with Hiccup and Finna.

But if Finna was not the one she should worry about, who was?

Astrid took a deep breath and resolved that she would ask Hiccup about what had happened in the meeting as soon as she got him alone.

Well, maybe not as soon as, since there was obviously a much more pressing and happy matter to attend to first, but she would ask him.

\* \* \*

><p>Stoick made his decision in a moment.<p>

It was a risky one, but the only decision that could possibly earn a

victory over the enemy. One move would seal his fate if the enemy noted the situation, but if the gods were in his favour and cast a veil of blindness upon his opponent, he could use that one move to his advantage.

But the gods did not favour.

"That was not smart," Gobber noted with no small measure of satisfaction.

"It was all I could think to do," Stoick admitted in defeat.

Gobber simply grinned and moved his final piece so that Stoick's king was surrounded and captured. "I believe this game is mine."

"Just like every other one," Stoick agreed.

Gobber began setting up the board with all the pieces. "Play again? You might win this time."

Stoick shook his head. "I'd rather spare myself the embarrassment." He heard a scream overhead and looked up to the skies. A Night Fury, closely followed by a Deadly Nadder, raced through the sky. He sighed heavily. "The poor kids."

"They're not kids," Gobber pointed out as he continued to set up the board.

"I know," Stoick said, "but, I just...I feel like we just got out of a war."

"We did." Gobber set up the final piece and made his first move. "Your turn."

"I told you, I don't want to play again." Stoick looked back up. They had just left one war, he had meant. Thanks to his son, one war had ended, but another was just on the horizon. "I wish I could spare them a lifetime of fighting, you know? Hiccup finally has some peace in his life, and I just wish he could enjoy it."

"Take it up with the gods, then," Gobber said. "Your move."

"I don't..." Stoick sighed and moved a piece at random. "He's a good kid."

"Man," Gobber corrected as he made his own move.

"Right. Man." Stoick pushed one of his pawns out. "He's smart too. He'll be a good leader. I just wish it could be easy for him."

"You planning to leave him in charge of the war?" Gobber joked. He took Stoick's pawn.

Stoick shrugged. "It seems Berk will never be at peace for long. I'm definitely planning on making him part of it. He has to learn how to fight people."

"He'll get it," Gobber assured him.

They played a few more moves before Stoick agreed, "He's smart."

"He gets it from his father." Gobber grinned as he took one of Stoick's five remaining pieces, leaving the chief's king completely undefended and surrounded on three sides. "Remember what my father used to say? 'There's as much smart in Stoick's head as there is fire in flint. You just have to knock the flint to get the flame.'"

Stoick groaned as he looked at the board. "I'm not feeling so smart right now."

"Well, your son's the only one who's ever bested me," Gobber bragged. "And it only happened once." He moved his piece to take the fourth adjacent square to Stoick's king. "Play again?"

\* \* \*

><p>Ymma popped a raspberry into her mouth and smiled as the sweetness invaded her senses.<p>

She had always hated summer. The days dragged on, the heat was sometimes unbearable, and pests swarmed in every corner. Years ago her mother had died from the summer; first the fever and the headache, then the spots and delirium and terrible thirst as the disease burned through her body before the gods had finally taken her.

Ymma looked at the three remaining raspberries in her hand and leaned back against the great yew. Wild berries were probably the only decent thing that came with warmer weather. She usually traveled in the summer, moving from place to place and never staying longer than a month.

Or she had once upon a time.

"Two years..." Ymma murmured before biting into another raspberry. It was the longest she had ever stayed in one location since her mother's death. She had been nine at the time, and since there was nothing to be done for orphans, particularly the orphans of those deemed "pagans," there was nothing to do but move on.

And so she had moved on for six years, making her way from a small coastal village in England and up to the top of Scotland. She stayed close to the sea, for she knew that she would find traders: Viking traders. Her mother had always said that the Vikings were their friends. The rest of the people lived in fear of them due to the stories from the days of pillaging, but Ymma's mother claimed they offered them a sort of camaraderie.

The same gods with different names.

The rest of the Anglo-Saxons had abandoned the old gods and had turned to the Christian one centuries before, but her mother had always claimed that the people still feared and needed the gods. They had come to her for remedies their apothecaries did not know, for charms and incantations the Christian God did not provide. And her mother would laugh at the people's inability decide whom they should worship and would dispense her knowledge of the old ways for a coin.

She had passed her knowledge to Ymma before her death, and she had passed a secret.

"There are others like us," she had murmured one night, though Ymma had not been sure if her mother had been sane or if the delirium were talking. "There are others who stayed true to the old gods. They are North, among the Gaels and the Scots...You will be safe with them."

Ymma had simply nodded as she looked at the rose-coloured spots on her mother's chest.

Her mother had grabbed her hand. "Find them. Promise me."

Ymma had nodded again.

Her mother had leaned back on her pallet, clearly satisfied, and had begun muttering to herself and picking at the strings in her blanket.

"I'm getting you some water," Ymma had said quietly, though her mother had only continued to mutter and hum and pull at loose threads. And when Ymma had come back with the wooden bucket filled with cool water from the nearby stream, her mother had stopped breathing.

A fly buzzed by her ear and she swatted it away and popped the last two berries into her mouth. Bugs multiplied in the summerâ€"yet another reason to hate the season. She sucked the red juice off her palm and wiped her hands against her skirt. Summer also brought back memories upon which she would rather not dwell.

She decided she should walk to the village and pick up whatever she could. Finding random and seemingly useless bits of information was certainly preferable to reminiscing about what she could not change.

"Nothing is useless," she reminded herself as she started walking.

Finna always said that. She always said that every bit of information could be used. Some things simply told one more about peopleâ€"what they liked, what they wantedâ€"and from that one could deduce even moreâ€"what they hated, what they feared, what they hoped people would never discover. Finna said everyone had something to hide, and that if a man were reluctant in giving information one only had to remind him of his secret and he would tell everything he knew. Sometimes, the secrets were not even necessary. Bluffs were easy, and most people did not catch on.

All a person needed to know was how everyone else thought.

Ymma heard a twig snap behind her and she wheeled around and brought a hand to the small dagger she always carried at her waist. She saw no one on the road and knew the noise could have easily been caused by a small animal, but she did not lower her guard. One of the first things Finna had taught her was that she should always expect danger.

Only when a small, brown rabbit scampered across the path did she

sigh and lower the blade.

"Och, that's a big one," a deep voice said behind her.

Ymma tightened her grip on the knife and spun around quickly and almost lunged forward to attack, but she stopped upon seeing the iron tip of an arrow pointed at a spot between her eyes. She took a deep, steady breath. "I could have killed you," she said in Norse.

"Ah think we both ken Ah coold's hae shot thes affair ye took another step."

She pursed her lips.

"Ye still hae a lot tae learn, Ymma."

Her eyes followed the shaft of the arrow to leather-bound fingers that held the end in place against the string. And next to the fingers and knocked arrow were dark eyes that shined with the fact that the owner loved nothing so much as a good joke.

"Put down th' knife, an' Ah'll put down th' bow."

She smiled. "You are afraid of me."

The man snorted. "No, Ah jist dornt trust tha' ye wouldnae try anythin'. Ah'd hate explainin' tae Finna why Ah had tae kill 'er favourite little spy."

Ymma put her knife back in the sheath at her belt. "After everything we've been through, Rust?"

The man lowered his own weapon and relaxed the string on the bow. "Och, aye."

Ymma studied his face. Above his wide, shining eyes were thick, dark eyebrows. He had the top part of his dark, wavy hair pulled back loosely, and several shorter patches had escaped and fallen across his forehead and in front of his ears. His nose was sharp and perfectly straight, his cheekbones were high and pronounced, and his grinning, wide mouth was framed by dimples and a short beard—evidence that he had not shaved in a week or so. "You're growing a beard," she pointed out.

Rust stroked his chin. "Jist a bit. Ah dornt want it too lang. Not good for shootin'."

She nodded. It looked good on him. Gods, everything looked good on him. He was just the sort of handsome man with whom she gladly would have carried on a flirtation if she did not know that he had been spoken for nearly two years ago and that he was fiercely loyal to, even if not deeply in love with, his betrothed.

Ymma frowned as a new thought occurred to her. "I thought you were Finna's favourite spy."

Rust rolled his eyes. "Ah've told ye. Ah'm nae a spy."

She crossed her arms. He looked tired and dirty, as if he had been traveling for several days and sleeping in the woods. "Where have you

been?"

He slipped his arrow into the leather quiver lashed to his back and shouldered his bow. "Oan a tradin' mission."

"Really?" She cocked her head to the side and appraised him. Like most Rowdy Ruckuses, he dressed in deep green and brown and leatherâ€"camouflage in the trees. He wore an odd combination of leather gloves. On his right hand, his knocking hand, the glove stopped at his wrist and covered his first and middle fingers. On his left, his bow arm, the glove stopped just below his elbow and covered his hand up to his knuckles. He had his bow and quiver and had tied a leather water pouch to his belt. A wool sack hung at his side, but it was empty. "What did you trade for? Air?"

Rust glanced down at his empty bag and cursed.

"You're not a good liar."

"Ah was east, with Maggie...Maggie?" He looked around.  
"Maggie?"

"Aye?" a female voice called from within the trees. A girl stepped out from behind a huge oak. She held the rabbit that had just run across the path by the scruff of its neck. The small animal had a small cord wrapped around its foot, and the rabbit struggled to free itself until the girl grabbed its head and twisted. The neck cracked. "Hello, Ymma," the girl said with a smile as she tied the dead rabbit to her belt.

"Magwart," Ymma returned. "They could hang you for poaching, you know."

Magwart shrugged. "They can try." She had all of her brother's sharp features, but she had a leather strap surrounding her dark hair and pulled down low to cover her left eye. The end of a deep, diagonal scar peeked out over her temple, and the rest of the cicatrice continued across her nose and ended in the middle of her right cheek. Ymma had never asked how Magwart had obtained the wound or whether or not she still had her left eye. She had always been too afraid of the answer.

"Ymma doesnae believe tha' we were oan a tradin' mission."

Magwart raised her eyebrows. "Ye cooldnae think ay somethin' better?"

Rust pressed his lips together in a poor attempt to look angry. "Ah take offense."

"Finna will nae like tha' ye let out the secret," Magwart warned playfully.

Rust gestured to Ymma. "She can't be angry tha' Ah let \_Ymma\_ figure it out!"

Magwart shrugged and Rust forced a comical groan, a reacting perfectly in line with his tendency to over-dramatize every situation.

Ymma smiled. Rowdy Ruckuses were known for several things. They had darker features than most Vikings—almost all of them had brown hair and eyes and tanned complexions. Their funny accents, heavily influenced by the presence of Gaelic in Scotland, were markedly different from the Vikings of the North and East, the ones from Norway and Shetland, from whom Ymma had learned their language during the years she had wandered around Albion before finding the Vikings in the Hebrides. And they all seemed to have remarkable senses of humour. The Rowdy Ruckuses were smaller and leaner than most other tribes, but this allowed for swiftness and stealth, and lack of size in no way meant a lack of power; for if there was one thing for which the Rowdy Ruckuses were known, it was their deadliness in a battle, their staggering intellect, their ability to sneak up behind an enemy and bring him down in seconds, before he had even realized he was being attacked. They were loyal and benevolent companions to those who had the good fortune to be their friends, and they were vicious threats to those who had the great misfortune to not be.

"I wouldn't worry," Ymma assured him. "She likes you. She'll kill you quickly."

"Tha' is a comfort." He rubbed his neck as if already anticipating the throttling he would receive, not that Finna would ever actually throw a fit. Finna kept the identities of her network spies secret not for control but for their own protection. When she found out, she would probably shrug and start assigning the three of them missions together. Ymma had her suspicions about others in the network; she would be willing to bet on three or four more, but beyond the smaller inner circle, she had no idea how wide Finna had spun her web of information.

Ymma bit her lip. She had yet to inform Finna of the decision she had made a few days before. She would be leaving soon. Finna would not be happy about that. She would not be angry, but she would definitely be displeased. Saddened, even, if Ymma could trust Finna whenever she insisted that they were in fact friends, that she enjoyed not only Ymma's abilities with plants and eavesdropping but also her company. Of course, Ymma had learned over the years that Finna rarely revealed everything to any one person; she told a person what she wanted him to know, nothing more and nothing less. Still, Ymma preferred to believe that it was true, that the other woman was her friend.

Leaving would prove exceptionally difficult.

Magwart reached up to her face and adjusted the leather strip over her eye. "Where are ye headed? Ye coolds come tae th' village with us. Stay with us tonight. Eat somethin'." She gestured to her belt. "Roast rabbit."

"It's a tempting offer," Ymma said honestly. "I was going to go into town and see if I could pick up anything useful."

"Och, tha' sounds fun..." Rust tapped his chin. "Ah might join ye."

Magwart nodded. "Ah'll head home."

"Why not come along?" Ymma asked.



Magwart fingered the ears of the rabbit. "They coold's nae catch me for poachin', but why tempt fate?" She walked up and threw her arms around Ymma. "Come eat wi' us tonight. Stay th' night."

Ymma nodded and returned her friend's embrace. "I will."

Magwart pulled back and pointed at her brother. "Watch out fur 'er."

Rust grinned. "Always."

Magwart took a step back and seemingly melted into the trees.

After a moment, Rust grinned broadly. "Maggie saw yer tracks an' said we'd meet a friend. Ah ne'er thought it woold's be ye."

Ymma nodded. Magwart could look at a single footprint and tell almost anything about the one who had made it. Male or female. Short or tall. Thin or large. Free or heavy-laden. Occasionally, she could even tell who the person was. It was that fact that had long ago led Ymma to the conclusion that the siblings worked for Finna in the same way she did. "She's good," Ymma supplied.

"She's a mite creepy."

Ymma raised an eyebrow. "She's your sister."

"That's how Ah ken." Rust jerked his head toward the village. "Shall we?"

As they walked, Ymma let her mind wander. From her mandrake supply to the nearby abandoned monastery where the soldiers were staying to the far away island of Berk. "When do you think she'll be back?" she asked after a long period of silence.

"Finna?" Rust scratched at his chin. "Ah dornt ken. Mebbe tomorrow or th' day after."

Ymma nodded. The small, foot-beaten path met with the main road that led to the center of the village. The road itself was little more than a wider dirt path trampled out by carts and people.

A small red squirrel dashed across the road, and three small dragons, no larger than cats and of all different colours, chased after it. The Vikings called them Terrible Terrors. Ymma thought they were adorable.

As the first building, thatched roof and wooden walls covered with plaster to trap heat in winter and cold in summer, came into sight, Ymma asked, "Do Terrible Terrors live up north as well?"

"Ah think so..."

Another house approached, built in the same style as the first. The village was a large one, holding nearly one hundred people. There was no lord, only an elected magistrate, so the population was that of free peasants, farmers who lived further out and artisans and traders. For centuries the village had traded with the monastery, but when the monks had left, different trade routes and the Vikings had brought enough prosperity to sustain the population. More recently,

the town funds had started the construction of a stone church in the town square, a grassy knoll where farmers and craftsmen set up their wares on market days and where women drew water and gossiped and where judgement for crimes was carried out and where people would head to the large tavern after a full day of work.

Ymma wondered if the Northern Viking villages were set up in the same way, or if they grew in a more haphazard fashion, with meeting places outside the main town and the chief living on the edge of the settlement, like the Rowdy Ruckus' village. "What's the North like?"

"Ah dornt ken. Ah've ne'er bin."

"But you know people, don't you?"

"Och aye, Ah ken folk. If rumours are true, Ah ken th' man they call th' dragon tamer."

Ymma smiled. "I've heard the northern dragons are huge. He must be terrifying if he tames those."

Rust let out a bark of laughter and pressed his hand against a wall as he doubled over. "Hiccup?" he gasped. "Naw...He...He's nae. He's jist...a bloke." He struggled to stop laughing and catch his breath. "He was a good kid. Smart, nice, funny, screw up..." He wiped at his eyes and started walking again. "He woolds hae bin a good Ruckus."

Ymma let her eyes fall on the new church. It was almost complete, save for the bell tower. Someone swung from the nearby gallows, but she could not tell who. A poacher, no doubt, caught hunting in the king's wood. For while the village was free of a lord, all the surrounding land belonged to the king of Scotland, except that he gave to the people for hunting and fishing.

"Yoo'd make a good Ruckus," Rust continued. He knocked her with his shoulder. "Rasch likes ye, ye ken."

Ymma shook her head. "No. I mean, Rasch is nice, but..." She trailed off as she realized they'd have to pass the gallows to get to the tavern, where plenty of people would be eating lunch or taking a midday break and where they could listen to many a conversation. She was not keen on passing by a place so covered in death, particularly when a dead man was there. It could lead to bad luck.

"But?" Rust prompted.

"I'm Anglo-Saxon." She did not belong with the Vikings. Not really. They felt like family, but she had plans to find her own people.

Rust laughed. "Ah dornt think he sees tha' as a problem."

"I mean...I just..."

He out a hand on her shoulder. "Nae ready. Ah get it. It's yer choice, ye ken."

They passed directly by the gallows, and against her better

judgement, Ymma looked up to see the criminal's face.

"Nae parents tae speak..."

She stopped and stood completely still. She could not breathe.

Not a poacher. Not a poacher at all.

How did she not notice before?

"Och, Ymma. Ah didn't mean tha'..."

Long brown hair and dead, blue eyes. Simple, brown dress.

"Ymma, Ah'm really sorry. Ah didn't mean it tha' way. Jist...ye ken, ye hae th' freedom." Rust put both hands on her shoulders and shook his head. "Ah didn't mean tae brin' it up."

Ymma shook her head. The poor girl had not even known her own name.

"Ymma?" Rust shook her gently. "Ymma, whit's wrang?" He looked behind him and took a sharp breath. "Och, gods...a friend ay yours?"

She shook her head again and tore her eyes away. "No. I mean..." Had she been? "No. I knew her. She was...an informant."

"What was 'er name?"

She stared at the ground. "She didn't know. She didn't...Oswyth. She liked that." A terrible thought started to creep into her mind, begging to take form. "She was a whore..." The end was near. She did not have much time. "They'll be after me next," she murmured as her heart started to race, "because I worship the old gods, and they won't let me be andâ€"

"Shh..." Rust pulled her tight to his chest, but she could still see the figure hanging over his shoulder like a bad omen. "Ymma, we'll take care ay ye. We won't lit tha' happen. Yoo'll be safe wi' us."

Something was wrong. She was wearing a brown dress. "I need the hood."

Rust pressed a hand to the back of her head, like a brother comforting a little sister. "'Er hood?"

"She wore a red hood," Ymma explained. "I...I need it. Someone has to..." She took a shaky breath. "Someone has to mourn her."

"Alright. Alright." He stroked her hair softly. "We'll fin' it."

Ymma closed her eyes tight. "She...she was the only person I knew who could get inside..." She trailed off, not bothering to clarify what exactly that meant. "We won't be able to..."

Rust seemed to understand, though, for he started leading her away while murmuring, "Finna will fin' a way. She always does."

Of course she would. Finna would have back up plans. She would know what to do.

But for Ymma, time was running out. Soon, she'd be the one hanging by the church. And she knew she had to leave before the people had the chance.

\* \* \*

><p>Snotlout pressed down on the sheep's side. The animal's fur had been recently shorn, and only an uneven covering of fuzz covered the pink, naked skin. The sheep bleated, a long and mournful cry, and tried to writhe away, but Snotlout held him fast to the ground.<p>

Ruffnut tugged on the sheep's leg and pulled it tight before bringing down her wooden stick on its shin.

Snotlout winced, and again the sheep wailed.

The girl did not even flinch, but grabbed the sheep's second leg.

"This is...not pleasant," Snotlout commented.

Ruffnut shrugged. "He's a wanderer. It has to be done."

"But breaking his legs...Like, I get it, he won't move, but..."

"I'll bind to my shoulders, and sing to him," Ruffnut explained. "By the time his legs heal, he'll be so used to my voice and presence, he'll never wander again. He'll not want to leave me."

"So...he'll be in your bed," Snotlout translated.

Ruffnut looked up at him. "In my room for a while, yeah. Until I can get him to sleep with the flock. Make sure no bugs are around, feed him, make him calm..."

"Get him all snuggly with the other sheep," he continued.

She scowled. "Sheep don't like to touch other sheep, stupid." She slammed the stick down a second time.

When Ruffnut grabbed the next leg, Snotlout looked up at the sky. He saw a black shape spinning and diving and falling in a very uncontrolled fashion. Another shape, multicoloured and bright, followed closely with far more grace and ease. He scowled. "Showoff."

"Hiccup?" Ruffnut asked casually as she broke the third leg.

"Of course." Snotlout snorted. "He just loves flying all crazy, letting that dragon get out of control. Thinks he's all that."

Ruffnut grabbed the fourth leg and quickly broke it. "You're just jealous because he has something you don't."

Snotlout shook his head. "Hiccup has plenty of things I don't. I'll admit that." He looked down at Ruffnut as she started to bind the sheep's legs in wooden splints. "An annoying voice, too many freckles..."

"Hero status, the girl you always wanted," Ruffnut continued. "A sense of humour, a brain."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You looking for a fight, Thorston?"

She grinned and tightened the first splint.

Snotlout looked back up as the two dragons swooped lower. He sat up straighter. "He's not alone."

"Of course he's not," Ruffnut agreed. "Astrid's with him, right?"

"No, I mean he's not alone on Toothless."

She tightened the second and third splint. "She's riding with him?"

"Astrid's on Stormfly."

Ruffnut stopped tightening the fourth splint and looked up as well. "What?"

"There's someone else with him...and I'll bet I know who it is." He smiled. "Finna Haugen."

"Who?"

"Finna Haugen. She's an old friend. One of the Rowdy Ruckuses."

Ruffnut raised an eyebrow. "You have a friend?"

"Well, technically, she's Hiccup's friend, but..." He trailed off and frowned. "Hey..."

"You can let go now," Ruffnut told him.

He took his hands off the sheep's side and Ruffnut began to bind the creature's front legs together. "You don't think he's decided to leave Astrid for Finna, do you?" he asked. It was a joke, of course. He still made moves on Astrid. He made it a daily goal. But, naturally, it was only for the purpose of annoying her and Hiccup.

Ruffnut snorted. "I don't know this girl, but I can tell you it's very unlikely."

"She's attractive," he said. "I saw her yesterday. Witty, sarcastic...Just like him."

"Doesn't matter."

Snotlout frowned. "How do you know?"

Ruffnut sighed and tied the sheep's hind legs together. "Because," she began before she paused, seeming to think better of her response. "I just know."

He smirked. "Being around Fishy has made you the expert on love?"

She glared at him. "Shove it, Butt Troll." She picked the sheep up and rested the animal across her shoulders and brought the ends of the leg bindings under her arms and around her torso several times before tying the straps in front of her chest. "I suppose you think you're the expert? What with all the girls falling for you?" She looked funny, defensive and proud while she had a naked sheep wrapped around her shoulders like a large collar or yoke.

But Snotlout could not laugh. As much as he loved making comments at Hiccup and Astrid for merely to fun of it, a small part of him still hoped. And Ruffnut's comment had hit home.

The sad truth of her remark was that he most certainly did not have girls falling at his feet everywhere he went. In fact, girls really tended to look far more often at his cousin, which was ridiculous, since his cousin was scrawny and weird, even if he were a hero and admittedly kind of awesome in a strange sort of tradition-breaking way. Girls talked about Hiccup, about someday marrying a guy like Hiccup, sometimes Hiccup himself, even though he already had made known his feelings for one girl in particular. And that was the worse truth: the girl that Hiccup fancied returned the feelings, and she was the only girl Snotlout had ever really wanted.

True, she had never really looked his way. She had never looked anyone's way until she had woken up one day and just decided that she liked Hiccup. It made sense, Snotlout allowed. He would openly that as much as he ragged on and made fun of his cousin, he thought the guy was pretty cool. He actually liked hanging out with him. Sometimes. Like the times when he was not thinking. In fact, he really only made comments about Hiccup because he was family, and that was what family was supposed to do.

And, yes, Ruffnut was right. He was jealous. Who would not be?

Not that he would ever admit to such a thing.

And, really, he had been over Astrid for a long time. She had made her choice, and that was fine. Maybe not at first. The first time he had seen her kiss him, just after he had woken up, Snotlout had felt like the weight of the seven worlds had been dropped on his chest. But he had quickly forced himself to move on, because he had never been one to stay down for long.

And over the years, the firm rejection had been easier to process. Sure, he still got annoyed, jealous, even, whenever the two lovebirds started getting unnecessarily affectionate. But that was only because a small part of him still wished and hoped that the first and only girl he had ever really liked would eventually get tired of his cousin.

But only a very small part, of course.

When he did not reply, Ruffnut smirked. "Well, then." She hefted the sheep and walked away, singing a honey-sweet lullaby that her voice mutilated to resemble the sound of a dying bird.

Snotlout turned to face her back. "Oh, sure! Whatever!" He then said in a high-pitched and nasal voice, "Oh, thank you Snotlout for helping me torture my sheep! You're my hero!" He then said in a voice an octave lower than usual, "Well, you're welcâ€" He was cut off when something struck him in the side of the head.

"Shut up!" Ruffnut shouted.

As she stalked away, he rubbed his temple and looked down at a large piece of wood that had fallen near his feet. He groaned and looked back up as two dragons once again circled overhead.

The larger part of him, the part unconcerned with a particular girl and more concerned with girls in general, wondered if he would ever fall for someone again. If he would ever have what Hiccup and Astrid had.

Then, a brilliant thought came to his mind, and he held onto it. Because he was not Hiccup, and brilliance did not come naturally to him.

Just because Finna had always gone out of her way to put him through pain after his usually foiled attempts to bully his cousin, just because she had blatantly rejected him within seconds the day before...None of that meant that he did not have a chance.

He smiled and brought his fingers to his lips and whistled long and loud.

A few seconds passed before Hookfang descended from the sky and nudged Snotlout with his head.

"You ready, boy? What do you say we go catch Astrid and Stormfly?"

Hookfang growled in approval and dipped his head so Snotlout could climb on his neck. When the boy was on, the dragon pushed off from the ground and started toward the two others who were darting about the sky.

Within seconds, Hookfang had come alongside Stormfly.

"So..." Snotlout began.

Astrid glanced at him but appeared unfazed. "So?"

"Enjoying yourself?"

She rolled her eyes and nodded toward her dragon. "\_She\_ is."

Well. Someone was not happy. And if he could guess by where her gaze was focused, the source of her misery lay with the woman whose arms were currently wrapped around Hiccup as they flew wildly through the sky. "How's the view?"

Astrid scowled. "Shut up."

He snickered and continued to watch Toothless. It suddenly dawned on him that Toothless' seemingly unmanageable behaviour was just that: unmanageable.

Hiccup could not control his own dragon. Toothless was not giving him the time of day, but seemed Hel-bent on knocking both riders to the ground.

It was almost funny, but he could not figure out why the Night Fury would be acting so strange.

"Toothless doesn't like her," Astrid said triumphantly, as if reading his thoughts.

"How do you know?" Snotlout asked. Maybe Hiccup had stupidly tried to feed Toothless eel that morning? Maybe Toothless just felt crazy.

"I received the same treatment when we first met."

Snotlout looked over at her. He had forgotten that Astrid's first flight had been on Toothless. He did not know the whole story, but he was aware that there had been some amount of very understandable animosity and that Hiccup had been forced to throw himself between the girl and dragon to keep them from killing each other.

Astrid smirked. "He's trying harder to throw her off, though. She's enjoying it too much, and he wants her to be miserable." She leaned back and smiled widely. "He attacked her."

Snotlout thought it was a strange thing to be happy over, a person being attacked by an angry Night Fury. He would not wish that fate on anyone. But Astrid was Astrid.

"Hiccup had to spend half an hour calming him down before he'd even let her on."

"Toothless warmed up to you," he pointed out. "And it didn't take long."

Her smile fell and she glared at him. "Do you want me to punch you? Because I will."

"I'm good." He looked ahead at Finna and Hiccup. "You know, you could always forget him. Let Finna take him."

Astrid blinked. "You know her too?"

He grinned. "From years past. We became reacquainted yesterday morning."

Astrid nodded. "That makes sense."

"As I was saying, if you just let her have him, then you and Iâ€"

"Don't push it."

Snotlout was about to retort when he heard a scream. Not a Night Fury



scream, but one that was decidedly human. He looked forward and almost could not believe what he saw: Toothless was plummeting toward the ground, his fake fin collapsed.

Well, that was not supposed to happen. Snotlout watched with morbid fascination as the dragon fell.

"Hiccup!" Astrid shouted as she spurred Stormfly toward the imminent crash.

Suddenly, the fin snapped back out and Toothless glided to a safe stop on the ground. Astrid landed not far behind.

Oh. That had been intentional.

Feeling only a bit disappointed that he had not seen more action, Snotlout urged Hookfang down as well. His dragon came to rest next to Stormfly and lowered his neck so Snotlout could slide off. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Hiccup had already dismounted and run to face Toothless.

"Toothless! What is \_wrong\_ with you?"

Astrid was near enough for him to hear as she murmured, "It's obvious, isn't it?"

Finna slid off Toothless' back and held her head. "Ah'm goin' tae sit..." She walked slowly toward a nearby rock and lowered herself slowly.

Astrid took the opportunity to approach Hiccup as he continued to berate his very unimpressed dragon.

Snotlout took the opportunity to continue where he had left off that morning. He strolled over to Finna and smiled. "So...Finna..."

She looked up at him. "Och, nae again." She rolled her eyes and rested her head in her hand.

He sat down next to her and she scooted away. "Where were we earlier? I thinkâ€"

"Ye ken," she began in a very light tone, "Ah had a perfectly wonderful conversation this mornin'." She then glared at him. "Ours wasnae it."

Still as biting and sarcastic as he remembered. "Ok..." He looked around for something to say. "You know, crazy how Hiccup couldn't control his own dragon, right?" He looked at her, but she had begun to fiddle with the leather strands that kept the lambskin tied around her boots. "I mean," he said louder, "I can control mine better than that."

"Hm," she replied.

He was not one to be thrown off by noncommittal answers. Astrid had given him plenty of practice over the years. "I'm one of the first and best trainers on this island, you know. No one can train a Monstrous Nightmare like I can."

"Nae one can gab abit himself like ye can, either."

He frowned. A response was good, but he had been hoping for something less...irritated. "You never liked me much."

"Hm."

Perhaps her dislike of him had something to do with Hiccup? She had always been his friend, after all, and Snotlout had bullied the boy a little when they were younger.

Fine. He had bullied him a lot.

"You always tried to look out for him," he said.

"Hm."

"But we're older now, you know." He looked at her as she sat up. "Hiccup and I are friends," he added pointedly.

"Really?" Her tone was disbelieving.

He grinned. "\_We\_ could be better friends."

The girl raised her eyebrows. "Ah wish we waur better strangers."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You think I'm a narcissist or something?" he asked, using a word he had heard Astrid call him once. He did not know exactly what it meant, but it was something bad.

"Nae. A narcissist is typically better lookin' than ye are." Finna glanced at Astrid and Hiccup before rising and stretching her arms toward the sky. "Ah shoolds go. Places tae be."

Snotlout watched her walk away before rising and squaring his shoulders.

He had chased Astrid for four years. He was not one to give up after one day.

\* \* \*

><p>Tuffnut rested his chin on the top of the long table and ran his finger along the inside of a hole in the wood while Fishlegs prattled on and scribbled something in the revised Dragon Manual. It had been an ongoing project for yearsâ€"a new book that essentially held every bit of information from the last book without all the "kill on sight" warnings.<p>

He had always wondered, often aloud, why they had bothered with a new book when they easily could have scratched out the death alerts in the old one.

"For presentation," his sister would reply before muttering that it was a subject about which he knew absolutely nothing.

He also often wondered why they even bothered with a manual at all. It had made sense when they had been killing dragons, when destroying the beasts had been a greater part of life than the dragons

themselves. Sure. He got that. Know your enemy and all that rot. But with the dragons living in homes and existing almost as family members...the idea of a manual was ridiculous. Since the dragons were so integral to daily life, the book was a bit superfluous.

In a few years, people would know all about the dragons simply because they lived with them. All their hard work would be useless.

And Ruffnut would just roll her eyes because they had the conversation every week.

"Tradition," Fishlegs would say simply, as if that solved everything.

Ruffnut would nod enthusiastically. Lately, she agreed with everything Fishlegs said. It was weird.

Like, it was fine whenever Astrid agreed with Hiccup. They butted heads occasionally, so it was not obnoxious whenever they took the same side; it was just expected.

But when Ruffnut agreed with Fishlegs, it was different. Weird different.

On one level...there was that.

Tuffnut saw it, and he had to question why everyone else seemed completely blind. And it was just so strange. Like, Fishlegs? Really? He did not get it.

So there was that thing. And that was slightly annoying.

But the whole "Fishlegs knows best" thing annoyed him on a different level too.

It had been cool when Astrid and Ruffnut had suddenly become thick after barely tolerating each other years ago—Astrid's being the showoff she had been when they were younger before she had mellowed thanks to Hiccup and Ruffnut's being only too pleased to push people's buttons. Astrid would say something egomaniacal and completely Astrid and Ruffnut would bite back with sarcasm or Ruffnut would intentionally push one of Astrid's buttons just to get to her and the glaring and eye-rolling competitions would begin. He thought that at one point they had even had a fight over Hiccup. Maybe. For, like, ten seconds. But the girls had worked it all out in the end, and they had formed a solid friendship over the years. That had been fine. Peace, finally. And his sister had a good female friend, and he could see how that would be good for her. He had the guys, she had a girl. Great.

But Ruffnut and Fishlegs...That had been Tuffnut's place once. They had always agreed on things. Sort of. They had been a single entity. The Twins. Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Partners in crime. Constantly quarreling with each other. Constantly finding trouble together. They had been inseparable. Best friends and siblings. Tuffnut would die before he ever publicly admitted it, but he felt replaced.

Not that it was anyone's fault.

Change was part of life and growing up.

Which made him wonder why tradition was so important.

"Look, I agree with you," Astrid would say in that way of hers that clearly conveyed that she did not at all agree and simply needed to stall for time so she could think of an argument. Because sometimes even the great Astrid Hofferson did not have an argument. Sometimes she just did not know, though she would pretend for all that she was worth that she did. "I agree," she would say again, "but...um..."

"What if something were to happen to usâ€"this is purely hypothetical, of courseâ€"and we were to forget everything we know about the dragons?" Hiccup would supply. "Or if we started fighting again and needed to remember? Or some cataclysmic event made us forget our way of life and our descendants were left with nothing of our histories?"

Astrid would nod firmly as if she had put the idea directly into Hiccup's head.

Tuffnut would snort and ask who would want to learn about being a Viking anyway. As far as he was concerned, Viking life was as boring as straw.

Hiccup would just look at him incredulously, as if to ask who would not want to know.

Tuffnut would then point out that if it were a matter of preserving culture and tradition, they should keep chicken and sheep manuals.

Hiccup would laugh as if it were the best joke he had heard in years. "But everyone in Midgard has sheep and chickens," he'd say. "Plus, caring for sheep and chickens...that's common sense" Then he'd bend over whatever crazy project he was working on at the moment. "Dragons are more complicated."

"Exactly," Astrid would say, as if the matter were closed.

And Tuffnut would concede that the matter was indeed closed. He would not dare to argue with her. He was not suicidal. He was not Hiccup, who would always have his respect for sometimes taking a chance and taking a stand against her. Maybe Hiccup did not realize how courageous he was beingâ€"he was weird like thatâ€"but Tuffnut would never count himself nearly that brave. And whenever Hiccup did itâ€"argued with herâ€"there were delightful results. She would look utterly shocked and vexed over the fact that someone had dared challenge her, and that expression on her face was positively priceless.

Once upon a time, Tuffnut had gathered the courage and made that expression appear by remarking that Hiccup's hypotheticals and what-if's were hardly convincing. What would happen to the Vikings? They had been around for three hundred years, and the only thing that could ever destroy them would be Ragnarok, and then a book would be worthless.

Her eyes had grown wide, her mouth had gone slack, and her brow had

furrowed. Then she had hardened her face into a stony expression that very clearly informed him that he would never again question her or Hiccupâ€"no room for arguments.

If he ever discussed it with Snotlout, he would just say that Hiccup was just weird, which was honestly the best answer Tuffnut ever got out of anyone.

Hiccup was weird. And occasionally surprisingly stupid for someone so smart. Because while Tuffnut could not quite grasp why keeping a revised Dragon Manual was important, he definitely could not begin to comprehend why Hiccup assumed he was one of the men best suited for the job.

Fishlegs keeping the journal? Sure. That made perfect sense. The guy was a walking Dragon Manual.

And he could see why Hiccup did not trust Snotlout with the job. Tuffnut himself trusted Snotlout with serious stuff only about as far as he could throw him. And Snotlout was huge, so Tuffnut could not throw him very far. Maybe not at all. He had never really tried.

But that did not mean that Tuffnut was a good choice.

He had worked for years to perfect his reputation. Dumb Tuffnut. The stupid twin. If no one thought he had a mind, no one would set him on intellectual tasks. He had a smaller chance of screwing something up and embarrassing himself.

Because when it came to words and numbers, he would inevitably screw up. He hated reading. The letters got all switched around or flipped in his head. No one else seemed to have the problem, so he had always just been written off as dim.

And he liked it that way.

No responsibility. No risk of disappointing people.

He cast a sideways glance at the Dragon Manual where Fishlegs had just written something down. Tuffnut would have assumed the word his friend had just scratched in charcoal was "dargon" if he had not known the context.

A perfect reputation.

Until Hiccup had come along. He had an annoying habit of seeing potential in people.

Of course, Hiccup was the only one. No one else had really changed their opinions about the male twin. For all Hiccup's claims he had not done it alone and that he most certainly could not have killed the Red Death without Tuffnut's or Astrid's or anyone's help, he was the big hero. And Tuffnut had been lucky enough to have been sucked into the plan.

Not that Tuffnut minded. He had solidified his reputation for a reason. It was impenetrable.

He drummed his fingers on the table.

A small part of him did wonder what it was like to be a hero, to be respected and sought after for opinions.

Not that Tuffnut would ever trust himself to give out his opinions. He honestly did not want any sort of intellectual acclaim. He knew he would eventually make a fool of himself. Smart things and sayings did not make sense to him. Reading and numbers did not come easy. And the intellect was Hiccup's thing.

But what would it be like to actually be taken seriously for once? As a warrior? For bravery or strength? He did not really have those things, not on a high level at least. But what would it be like if someone actually trusted him for him? Not for some hidden potential or what he might be or what he definitely was not?

Tuffnut yawned and stood up. All of that would take effort. And he was not willing to put in effort for anything. Even notoriety as Berk's most deadly weapon was not worth the work.

Fishlegs started. "Where are...We haven't finished."

Tuffnut strolled toward the front door of the Ingerman home and waved over his shoulder. "You've got it covered."

"But...I don't know what the Zippleback's least favourite food is!"

Tuffnut stopped in his tracks and turned around.

Fishlegs looked down at the book and back up with wide eyes. "I just...I don't know, and I think it would be helpful..."

Really? Tuffnut knew he was not exactly a genius, but even he knew the answer to that one without even thinking. Hiccup had shown them on the fourth day of training. They had not known it then, but still. "Eel. I'm going to go take a nap."

Fishlegs smiled sheepishly. "Oh." He chuckled. "Right. Um...I guess that was obvious. Alright..."

Tuffnut rolled his eyes and turned back around. He pushed open the door and walked into the afternoon sunshine.

He looked around and immediately noticed Hiccup and Astrid walking down the hill with Toothless and Stormfly trailing after. Astrid was looking positively miffed, and he could easily understand why. Hiccup was chatting and laughing, but not with her. There was another girl with them. Lean and brunette and pretty from a distance. He had never seen her before, which meant she was one of the visitors for the Thing.

He grinned.

Perhaps a nap was not in order just yet. Not while there were lovely strangers around.

\* \* \*

><p>The chieftains were all about the town, most headed up to the Great Hall for a meal, some embracing old friends or challenging

people to arm-wrestling. By sunrise, all would be gone. It was a long way to travel for two days for some, but they were Vikings. And not just any Vikings. They were island Vikings, the greatest seamen since time began. Their home was on the water.<p>

For her part, she needed to get back.

Or away.

After years and a childhood of protecting him, he had grown up. And he did not need her anymore.

She needed to get away from that.

From that and his life and Astrid Hofferson.

She had expected that Astrid Hofferson would be possessive. That strong of a woman would be a fool to let go of a man like him, and she would be a fool to let anyone else get close.

She had not expected that Astrid Hofferson would love him.

No, she had not expected that at all.

Finna glanced over her shoulder, just to be sure no one else was following her. Snotlout had been bad enough, but just after losing him, some other boy had started tailing her.

There was something wrong with the Hairy Hooligan boys.

Seeing no one, she picked up her pace and made her way down the walk to the docks.

She needed to get her mind off of the day. None of that was important. There was a war, a war that needed understanding and cunning to win, and after a day or two of travel, she would be thrown back into the tension.

She needed to talk to someone, someone she could trust. Her first instinct would be to go to Rust, who had worked for her the longest, but he was not available. She would talk to him when she arrived home, of course. He and Magwart would surely be back from the coast and the new Norman settlements with further information. Her second instinct would be to talk to Ymma, sharp and quiet, and far more prone to listen than offer advice. But Ymma was home as well.

She reached the ship on which she and her father had arrived and jumped onto the deck. A tent was stretched from the mast to the stern, and a dark-haired figure lay sprawled in front.

She walked over to the man and kicked his arm. "Kali."

The man flailed his arms as he jerked up. "Thor Almighty!" He rubbed at his impish face in an attempt to wipe off sleep and exhaustion.

Finna grinned. "Just me, though I've been told the resemblance is uncanny." She jerked her head toward the tent. "Everyone inside?"

"The whole crew." Kali opened up the tent flap. "Guess who's here?"

"Finna!" a girl cried out jovially. She had the same face Kali did, upturned eyebrows and upturned nose and small, devilish grin. The girl scooted over and patted the ground between herself and another man.

Finna took a seat and nodded to the quiet man to her side. The man kept his hair long and his beard short, and he was decent looking in good light. "Haven't ventured outside?"

"Too cold," the girl answered.

Kali took a seat. "What do we have to eat, Kola?"

"Raw carrots and stale bread," the girl offered. "Goat cheese and onions."

"I'll take the bread and the cheese." He looked at Finna as Kola pulled food out of a crate. "It's freezing out there."

"You're weak. The lot of you," Finna said.

Kali took the food and shrugged.

"Food?" Kola offered.

"I'll head up to the Hall later." Finna looked at the other man, the one who had not spoken. "Eaten, Rasch?"

The man nodded and looked down at the small block of wood he was intent on carving with a smaller knife. Finna could not tell what it was, but she thought it could be a stag when he was finished. "When do we leave?" she asked.

"At morning twilight," Kali offered before taking a bite of bread and swallowing it. "With the outgoing tide." He looked at his sister. "Ready to get home, Kola?"

"Barely been away, Kali." The girl looked to Rasch, the makings of a joke apparent in her features. "What about you, Rash? Ready to see Ymma again?"

Rasch kept his head down.

"Never known a widower to wait so long," Kali added. "You're getting old..."

"He's still twenty-seven," Finna said. Rasch would never defend himself against teasing. "He has plenty of time left."

"You've been with the Berkians all day," Kali said.

"I'm amazed you haven't picked up their funny accents," Kola said.

Kali cleared his throat, and, in a poor imitation of the sharp vowels and consonants and clipped speech the northern islanders used, said, "I t'eenk it weell rain."



Kola descended into a fit of giggles, and the two began holding a nonsensical conversation in their Berkian accents.

Finna envied them their carefree nature. A war was looming, and her father's health had not been good of late. In a few years' time, she might see herself leading a tribe and an army.

But first, she needed to know exactly the size of the force she was up against.

Rasch nudged Finna and asked in that quiet, steady way of his, "What are you thinking of?"

Finna looked down at her hands. She could trust him. He had not worked for her long, but he was good and silent. "I know of someone who can get inside," she said. There was no need to specify what that meant. "We need numbers. Real numbers, not just rumours of numbers. Five-thousand...eight-thousand...six-thousand soldiers and fifteen-hundred calvalry..." She laughed quietly. "I don't know what to believe."

Rasch nodded and continued to carve. He would not say anything else for a long time. He was a man of very few words.

The English could fight over any king they wanted or did not want, as far as she was concerned. All she cared about was protecting her people. Perhaps...She knew some people who knew others in the Danish court. Maybe the Danes could come to their side. Maybe the Swedes.

A king who wanted the world like Williame would not stop because of a treaty. No man ever became king by treaty, and no king ever acquired land by way of peace. Not Rome, not the Franks. Once the Norman king had what he wanted, once he knew how to train his own dragons, once he commanded his army of dragons, what would prevent him from breaking the small treaty with their tribe? What would prevent him from conquering, Berk or Iceland or Greenland?

The Normans could crush the Vikings. With their better weapons and larger forces and solidarity in Normanz, they would crush them, and even if they maintained peace long enough to get information about the dragons, once they had that weapon, it was only a matter of time before they did crush them.

Unless she was wrong, and she was never wrong, war was coming. While Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods, did not seem close at hand, the twilight of the Norsemen certainly was.

**\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't.\*\***

#### 4. Chapter 4

**\*\*Ok. I'm going to...be an anthropologist for a moment. Sorry. You can totally skip this if you like, but I'm just justifying my use of a word right here, and it may get confusing later...Oh, I'll just get on with it. I will not be using the word **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i/gothi\*\*\_\*\*** to signify the nice old ladyâ€"referred to in the movie as "the Elder," and not **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\***, as a random fun factâ€"who picked the winner in the first movie. See, **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** does not, never has, and**

never will define a shamanistic female elder. **\*\*\_\*\*GoÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** refers to a **\*\*\_\*\*male\*\*\_\*\***, religious **\*\*\_\*\*chieftain.\*\*\_\*\*** So, if Stoick were to suddenly take it upon himself to be the liaison between the people and the gods, he would be called the **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** instead of the **\*\*\_\*\*yfimaÃ°r\*\*\_\*\*** or **\*\*\_\*\*hilmir\*\*\_\*\*** or what have you. Pick your favourite word. They're interchangeable. A **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** is a chief and a priest. The chief part is just as important as the priest part, and the male part is only a close second in importance. A female **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** is actually called a **\*\*\_\*\*gyÃ°ja\*\*\_\*\*/\*\*\_\*\*gythja.\*\*\_\*\*** This is of course very distinct from a **\*\*\_\*\*hofgoÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** or **\*\*\_\*\*hofgyÃ°ja\*\*\_\*\*** who lived and worked in a temple (**\*\*\_\*\*hof\*\*\_\*\***) separate from the community. Both enjoyed great political influence even after the spread of Christianity (which was honestly extremely fast and peaceful, but I'll talk about that later...). Now, the lovely old lady who lives among the people as a religious leader with absolutely no political ties would historically be called a **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lva\*\*\_\*\*** (spelled differently in the Old Norse, but my computer won't do the stupid symbols, so we're going to work with Icelandic for now). She was an elderly woman who had distanced herself from the rules of society and strong family bonds that governed it (though not society itself) and was revered as a seeress, a sorceress, and a shaman. They were so highly esteemed, it was believed even Odin would visit the **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lvur\*\*\_\*\*** for guidance. Younger **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lvur\*\*\_\*\*** were often viewed in a more sexual way, and were believed to be great seductresses. But when they grew older, they took on apprentices, cared for the young children, maintained traditions...And so on. Also, as a fun fact, there was no such thing as a male **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lva\*\*\_\*\***. If a male dared to place himself in such a highly revered role dominated completely by women, he was tortured and killed. **\*\*\_\*\*VÃ°lvur\*\*\_\*\*** and **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°ar\*\*\_\*\*** shared some traits, such as their ability to communicate with the gods and their ability to see the future, but the **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lvur\*\*\_\*\*** were shamans and elder women who took cultural and religious and traditional leadership and the **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°ar\*\*\_\*\*** were mostly men and were also involved in politics, or they lived alone in their temples and had some say in political action. So, what most of the fandom refers to as a **\*\*\_\*\*goÃ°i\*\*\_\*\*** is actually a **\*\*\_\*\*vÃ°lva\*\*\_\*\***, and I will be referring to her as such, because I'm crazy, and because I want to differentiate her from the **\*\*\_\*\*hofgoÃ°i\*\*\_\*\***. Just so we clear that u\*\*p \*\*.

**\*\*Sorry...about all that...\*\***

#### **\*\*Chapter 4: Council\*\***

She had slept with the shutters closed and rags stuffed in the cracks. In mid-summer, the sun set, but light never left the sky. She could hardly wait for the mid-winter, when the sun would only be in the sky for five short hours, when light would only be present for a few longer.

Late autumn and winter were sleepy times. Times when everyone could rest as long as they liked, since no one really knew the time of day.

Those were also festive times. Her family would celebrate the first snow and Snoggletog and other holidays, including her own birthday. And her mother would make goat cheese balls with dried apples and hazelnut slices. And she would mix some of the summer honey with ground hazelnut and make a paste to spread on fire-toasted bread. And

stewed greens and carrots with goat fat and chopped hazelnuts. Baked apple and hazelnut bread and hazelnut cookies. Hazelnut and honey and oat sticks that crumbled so deliciously as one bit into them. Cod cooked with hazelnut and the last of the juniper berries...All the hazelnuts she could eat.

Her eyes flew open.

She would not be at home when the winter came.

Because she was getting married.

She turned onto her back and pressed her hand to her chest.

She was getting married to Hiccup, and come winter, she would be living in his home. Would they be in the loft? That seemed the most likely option. Or maybe they would have a room attached to the house, like Grimefoot and Thorhalla had.

She would be living with him. Waking up next to him...

Not for the first time in the past few days, she bit her lip as her mind fluttered to other things that inevitably came with marriage. She pressed her hands to her face, cold fingers against burning cheeks. She knew some things. She had been through four family marriages and had heard women talk. But she still had so many questions. She knew that just before the wedding all the women would fill her head with raunchy stories and advice, but Astrid figured she should know as much as she possibly could in case some of what was said was misguided. She had never been one to get things wrong, and she certainly did not want to mess up such an important...event. That would be positively awful. And she did not want to ask her mother. Asking the woman who had given birth to her about the particulars of procreation seemed just a bit awkward

.

Fortunately she had four sisters-in-law. Thorhalla would probably go out of her way to make Astrid as uncomfortable as she could be. She would tell her all sorts of things that would make Astrid sorry she had asked. And then she would turn around and tell her husband and they would laugh about it and tease Astrid for years. She did not know Alga as well as she would have liked and she felt uncomfortable broaching the topic with her. And Astrid did not want to talk to Waspnest about anything. She did not want to hear about the rest of the village's experiences in bed, and she certainly did not want the rest of the village to know about hers. That left Kata. And that choice made sense. Kata was young, easy, and kind, and she was about to give birth to her third child. She obviously had enough practice. Certainly she could explain everything Astrid needed to know.

Her mind flashed to a comment someone had made the previous day. A comment about Hiccup's dragon riding and how it would translate to the bed...Astrid ground her teeth as her embarrassment changed to anger.

Finna.

Astrid had been so much happier before she knew of that woman's existence. But Finna was...gone.

Astrid sat up straight in bed.

Finna was gone.

She finally had Hiccup to herself again.

She could finally talk to him without worrying about interruptions...

She rolled out of her bed and dressed quickly and tied her headband without bothering to braid her hair. She charged down the steps and through the front door. She almost knocked her mother down on her way out.

"Astrid!" Gundy called. "Where are you going?"

Astrid did not stop to answer. Instead, she searched the sky for a tell-tale streak of black, but none appeared.

It was still early. He might have been sleeping...

Five minutes later, she leaned against the wall of his house and pressed a hand to her chest as she fought for breath. Usually, she used the door when she went to see him, but she also usually knew where Stoick was. Their chief could easily be in the house, though, and she did not want to run into him on her way up the stairs. That would be an unpleasant conversation.

Even though Hiccup had essentially courted her for three years, they were technically not allowed to be alone together, especially not in bedrooms. People turned a blind eye when the two of them went on short flights or spent time alone in the forge or the great hall, and no one really cared when they were in each other's bedrooms while other friends were with them. But if it were known that they frequently spent time alone, sneaking around, sitting on each other's beds...Her mother would never live down the shame. Her father would never look at her again. Her brothers would kill Hiccup.

And that was not an exaggeration.

She looked up. The window was about five feet above her head. It would be an easy, short climb. She jammed the toe of her boot into a crack in the wooden wall.

"Astrid? What are you doing?"

She jumped and turned around and found herself staring at Stoick.

Oh...that was just perfect. There was nothing better than being caught sneaking into a boy's room by his own father.

She pressed herself up against the wall and bit her lip. Why should she be scared of Stoick? He did not look angry. To the contrary: he looked greatly amused. And it was not as if she had been doing anything particularly \_wrong\_.

Aside from trespassing, of course. And trying to break into his house. And trying to sneak into his son's bedroom.

Because that just was not \_done\_.

Now Hiccup absolutely had to marry her. He could not get out of it even if he wanted to. Not that she would have let him...

"He's in the forge."

She blinked several times. "Oh." She glanced at her feet, at the sky, down the hill. Anywhere but Stoick's direction. "Thank you."

And then he began to roar with laughter. He slapped his stomach and threw back his head before waving his hand and saying, "Go on, then!"

She ran down the hill, leaving Stoick laughing behind her.

She supposed it could have been much worse.

She slowed to a walk as she neared the forge. No smoke billowed from the stacks, and she could not feel the usual heat radiating from the building. She stepped through the doorway. Gobber was not around.

"Hiccup?"

"I'm in here!" his muffled voice called.

She smiled and walked toward his workshop and pushed open the door. He had replaced the curtain a few months before. The door had a simple wooden lock that served the purpose of keeping away nosy and curious children. Younger kids had started going through his papers, hoping to learn something and driving Hiccup insane. She had told him he was an idol, that he should have felt flattered. He had said they cluttered everything and messed up the organization, and he had added the door and lock. For her part, she could not see how the space could be any\_mor\_e unorganized. Papers and sketches covered the walls. Books and parchment filled the shelves and threatened to spill onto the floor that was already littered with pages and scraps. She could not walk into the room without stepping on something, and as she picked her way around things that looked somewhat important, she decided that mess must accompany genius. "What are you working on?"

He sat on a low stool and leaned his elbows against the writing desk. He held a small wooden box with wheels and peered at it. "Just a...uh..." He trailed off with his mouth slightly open.

He did that on occasion. He got caught up in whatever he was doing and forgot that someone else was in the room. She liked that just as much as she liked the little line that formed between his eyebrows whenever he concentrated. But she did not know how long he would stay that way, so she nudged his shoulder. "Hiccup."

He shook his head. "Oh. Right." He flashed her a crooked smile before glancing at the wooden box in his hands. "You're going to think I'm crazy..."

She rolled her eyes and ran a hand through his hair. "You always say that."

He leaned into her touch and smiled. "I guess I do." He looked a little funny with hair mussed and sticking up, and she suppressed a giggle as he sat straight and gestured to his box. "Well, I'm working on an automatic cart."

"A what?"

"A cart that will push itself," he explained. "Sort of...I mean, I'm trying to get it to move on its own so we don't have to push them. We can carry more over longer distances, see?"

"How will it turn if we don't push it?"

"Ooh! Come on!" He jumped up and accidentally knocked her into a barrel, but he caught her wrist and pulled her up. "Careful." He pulled her out of the little workshop and into the main forge. He stopped in front of a large table and set the box, which she realized was a model of a cart, upside down on the surface. "Alright." He leaned over and squinted as he leaned over. There were tiny holes, hundreds of them, laid out in a grid, and he seemingly randomly placed six little pegs in those holes. After a moment, he straightened and flipped the cart over. "Check this out." He gave the cart a slight tap and it rolled forward a few inches.

Then the front wheels suddenly swiveled to the right and it turned. After an inch it turned to the left. And to the left again. And, after a longer distance, to the right. And to the left...

"That's amazing!"

The model slowed to a stop.

She picked up the cart. "So...Each row is like a command? And the distance along the row is the distance between turns?"

"You figured it out," he said with a wide grin.

She nodded. The pegs controlled the turning. How long had that taken? How many nights had he spent thinking about how he could...determine ahead of time exactly when and which way the cart would turn... "And it stops after the last row?"

He shrugged. "Well, technically, if the wheels would keep turning, it would repeat the pattern." He sighed and took the cart from her. "And then there's an issue with going uphill...I'm trying to work on that."

"So you start it by pushing?"

"Well, I'm working on that too."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her chin on his shoulder so that their cheeks were flush. He smelled good, like clean sweat and wood smoke and pine needles. She closed her eyes as she listened to his words and the sound of his words, sweet and nasal and mumbled.

"I want it to start on its own, and I was using something springy with a bowed shape, but metal was too stiff and wood breaks. So Finna suggestedâ€" "

"Finna?" she asked as her eyes flew open.

"Yeah." He put a hand on her arm and gently rubbed her wrist with his thumb. "She suggested a coiled piece of metal. Likeâ€"

Astrid pulled away from him. "I didn't know you talked to her about your inventions."

He shrugged. "I mean, yeah. For a long time she was the only one who listened."

Ah. There it was. A reminder of years she could not take back. She sometimes wished she could do those years over, but never so strongly as she did at that moment. She wished with everything she was that she had been the one to listen, partly because he just deserved that. And her face must have shown the regret, for when he looked at her, his expression fell.

"Hey. I didn't mean toâ€"

"You've known her a long time," she said, because the other part of her regret was fueled by jealousy. Yes, she was woman enough to admit it. She was jealous. Jealous of lost time and attention.

"Well, yeah, butâ€"

"You're close," she said through gritted teeth.

Hiccup furrowed his brow and let his mouth hang open slightly, like he did when he was confused. In other circumstances, she would have let her mind stop on how much she liked that little quirk, but she was far too angry to dwell. He seemed to realize he was treading on dangerous ground and said carefully, "I mean, I haven't seen her in yearsâ€"

Oh, she caught that. He was deflecting, and he was very bad at it. "But you never mentioned her." Four years or not, they were close. And while she knew that Hiccup would never withhold anything from her, she felt that she had been kept completely in the dark about a fairly large part of his life. And the fact that said part of his life involved a girl who harboured very obvious feelings was quite bothersome.

Hiccup placed the cart carefully on the table. "I mean, I guess she never came up in conversation."

She gaped at him. "She 'never came up in conversation'? Are you serious?" She knew it was a valid excuse, because she had never bothered asking about his feelings before Toothless entered his life. After he had defeated the Red Death, they had been one entity, Hiccup and Astrid. And it had never occurred to her that at some point in his life there might have been someone else.

And the thought made her furious. And the thought that she was furious over something so trivial in the past made her even more furious. And the thought that she was being utterly ridiculous because she did not own him made her even more furious.

Hiccup's eyes darted to the side. "No, I guessâ€"

"And who in Hel's name is Camicazi?"

His eyebrows shot up. "How did you know about her?"

"'Her'?" One more girl. Even if there had never been anything between them...She had to know. "Camicazi is a '\_her\_'?" She was painfully aware of how her tone was rising in pitch, the way it always did when she was angry.

She never would have thought it possible, but his big eyes grew even wider. "What? You don't think thatâ€œ"

She poked him hard in the chest. "Oh, you know exactly what I think, Hiccup!"

"Ow!" He rubbed at the spot where she had just poked him, and then he looked at her and had the audacity to \_laugh\_.

So she hit him again. Hard and with the side of her fist.

He staggered back and looked at her blankly for a minute before his expression turned incredulous. "Wait...You were serious?"

She swung at him again, but he dodged her blow and stepped back. He was quick. He always had been.

"You can't beâ€œ"

She swung again. And he dodged again. He was absurdly quick. It was frustrating.

"Astrid, would you just..."

If she could just land one damn blow...

"I'm notâ€œ"

She swung twice, once with her right and immediately after with her left. He would not be able to dodge that.

She was right. He did not dodge. He caught her wrists and held them fast instead. Oh, she regretted all those days of training she had given him. If she caught him off-guard, she knew she could take him down, but over the years they had become fairly evenly matched.

"It's you! It's always been you!" he shouted.

For a moment she tugged against him, but then his words settled over her and she stilled and asked, "Really?"

"Gods, Astrid!" He released his hold on her hands and held the sides of her face and leaned his forehead against hers. "I've been crazy about you since I was, like, eight!"

"Really?" It had only ever been her...And she had probably looked like an idiot for thinking that he could ever...She \_felt\_ like an idiot. And he had just let it happen. He had let her make a fool of herself because he had never bothered to say anything...She ground



her teeth and pushed him back. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Whaâ€" He stumbled into the table and stared wide-eyed at her. "I thought you knew!"

She threw out her arms. "How could I \_possibly\_ know?"

"I thought it was obvious!" He put his hand on his head and scrunched up his hair. "Gods, I'm never as \_stupid\_ as I am when I'm around you!"

Obvious? As if she ever knew what he was thinking. "And in all those years you never thought to just \_tell\_ me?"

"We were kids! I thought you hated me!"

Alright. That was a valid point. But he could have said \_something\_ in the past three years. "Before now!"

He stuck his hands out when she tried to swing at him again. "Ok, I have no idea what this is about anymore!"

"Don't you?" she shouted. If truth were known, she was angry with herself for being so foolish and not having any sort of confidence in what she knew. And she was angry that she had ever thought anything before the present even mattered. But she was also angry that he could not understand. She had not explained herself well, but still...She stepped forward. "Don't you?"

"Whaâ€" "

"Well, fine, then!" Feeling utterly ridiculous, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the forge. Then she remembered that she had not even done what she had gone to do in the first place, so she turned around and stormed back in.

He was bent over the table. "My dad told me about the engagement!"

"Gah!" He whipped around, but his metal prosthetic slipped from underneath him and he fell to the floor, banging his head against the table edge as he went.

Her rage dissipated as she realized that she might have inadvertently \_hurt\_ him. She supposed that she could have hurt him if she had actually succeeded in hitting him. But for the moment, the only thing that mattered was his being in pain. "Hiccup!" she cried as she ran to him and knelt by his side.

He sat up and rubbed at the back of his head. "So...you know."

She sat back on her heels and nodded. "For two days now."

"Ah." He suddenly became extremely interested in the ground. "Alright, then."

She swallowed. Their being mutually aware did not make the subject any less new or awkward. "When did your dad tell you?"

Hiccup laughed a little. "Well, he's actually been talking to me

about it for a few months now...Wanted to make sure I was fine with it." His head snapped up and his eyes met hers. "Which, I mean, I am. Of course I am."

She smiled at her hands. He knew. He had been discussing it for so long...Really, that explained his slightly more awkward behaviour over the past few weeks. "My dad didn't ask me."

"Oh." He looked down at the ground again.

She realized the implications of her words and panicked. "But I told him I'd never have spoken to him again if he had refused!"

"Oh." He looked up at her and smiled.

She smiled back. "I love you." His eyes grew incredibly wide and his mouth fell open and she forced a laugh. "What's with that reaction?"

He shook his head. "Nothing...It's just...you've never said."

She blinked hard. She must have said it at some point. She had known it for so long that the idea had just set itself inside her mind as an established fact. She knew she that loved him like she knew that her bothers had yellow hair and that the wall of Asgard, built by the horse Svaðilfari, lacked a single stone block and that winter always followed autumn. "Haven't I?"

"I mean..." Hiccup shrugged. "I knew, but you just never actually said it."

"Oh." She wondered how in the nine worlds she had managed to not tell him. "Well, I do. I love you."

He grinned. "I love you back."

She really liked that smile. "I know."

And for a moment, they simply sat, smiling at each other like idiots.

Then Hiccup stood suddenly. "Oh! I want to show you something." He turned and ran into his workshop.

With a sigh, she rose and followed him back into the sea of papers. "You know...the first time I was in here, I thought you were the weirdest person I had ever met."

He was pushing things on his writing desk to the side. "Really?"

"I still think that."

He froze for a second before he resumed clearing with a bit less enthusiasm. "Well...I don't know what to say to that."

"In a good way."

He looked at her and furrowed his brows. "Thanks...I think..."

"No," she said hurriedly. "I like that about you."

"Uh-huh..."

"I do!" she cried. "I like that you're weird and that you talk funny and ramble on about nothing and stutter when you get nervous and that your smile is crooked and that your teeth aren't straight and..." She stopped when he gave her a lidded look. At a loss for words, she motioned very generally in his direction.

He slowly smiled, a grin that grew wider and sweeter and more crooked by the second. "You just gestured to all of me."

She smiled and nodded. "All of you."

He took a deep breath. "How do you do that?"

Now it was her turn to feel confused. "Do what?"

"Say the worst thing at the worst time and follow it up with something so perfect?"

She laughed. "Talent, I guess. You had something to show me?"

"Oh. Right." He turned to the table. "Well, I started working on this last night. And I was going to show you after we had talked about..." He trailed off and drummed his fingers against the wood.

"The engagement," she finished.

"Yeah. Anyway, I started sketching this..."

She walked over and stood next to him and looked down.

The sketch was a plan of a house. A small house, traditionally built with two doors and three rooms on the ground and provisions for a small loft. For a moment, it looked like any other home. And then she covered her mouth with her hand when she realized.

Oh.

\_Oh.\_

She looked closer as her heart began to thud so loud she was sure he could hear it. There were no notes on extending beams or anything plans would probably require for attachments to an already-existing house. It was to be separate, then. Its own entity.

"There's a land space. It's too far from my house, because I just can't move very far away, not while I'm still learning everything from my dad..." He shook his head. "Anyway. It's a fairly simple design, and not too large, but I don't think we'll need so much space. Not for a while, at least. I mean, there's enough space for, you know...uh..."

She nodded. Children. Their children. In their home.

Their own home. Their own \_life\_.

She knew she should be scared, or at least overwhelmed, but as she stood next to him and felt how absolutely \_right\_ everything was, she

could only be excited for the imminent and tremendous change they were discussing.

Her took her hand from her mouth and reached out to lightly trace the lines on the page. "Oh, Hiccup..."

She looked at him and saw that he had been watching her and waiting for a reaction. So she smiled at him, and he smiled back. In that moment, everything was perfect.

And then he kissed her, which made the moment even more perfect. Slow and sweet and gentle.

She loved this man completely. If she had to spend the rest of her life with one person, she thanked the gods she had been allowed to spend it with him.

He pulled back and they just looked at each other for a moment before he kissed her again, harder than that time.

She squeaked in surprise. Usually, she was more forceful, and the change was nice in a way.

He slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss, and her mind slowed to a stop. Change was very nice. And then he was kissing her as he never had before, fast and wet and sloppy and it was so incredibly wonderful and she forgot how to breathe. Warmth spread from her fingertips and toes as he backed her against the door. She brought her hands up and wrapped her arms around his neck and felt very glad that she had not tied back her hair because his long, clever fingers tangling in the mess behind her head felt so delicious and he tasted so wonderful and she could not tell which way was down or if she were standing on the ceiling.

She ran a hand down his chest as she tried to comprehend the fact that he was going to be her husband and a new heat filled her. The heat spread from the deepest part of her being, strange, foreign, but not unwelcome. In fact, she rather liked it, and it seemed to demand more. More fire, more passion, and a deeper touch. It excited an aching in places she had never ached before, but the ache was not uncomfortable. It felt good. Really good. It made her want to do something crazy, though she did not know what. And she was trying to figure out exactly what she could do to feed that heat and that ache when he pulled away abruptly and held her at arms length.

His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open as he tried to catch his breath. He looked like he desperately wanted to say something.

Was he going to recite a poem? She hoped not. Some men wrote poems when they courted girls, but Hiccup never had, and she sincerely hoped he was not about to start. He was so skilled at coming up with delightful and useful inventions and not so skilled with forming coherent sentences...She loved him, but she hated to think what his poetry might be like.

If truth were known, she did not want to listen to him at all. She wanted to kiss him again, in the same way they had been, and she wanted to feel that new sensation again, for the heat was dying in her stomach and the ache had long fled and she sorely missed the sensations.

Hiccup took a deep breath and said, "You need to leave."

Well, that was...not what she had been expecting. And very disappointing. "Whatâ€" No. Leaving was not an option. And she wanted to get back to what they had been doing before he had made such a ridiculous request. She reached forward and let her fingers trail down his front. "Hiccup!"

He jerked away from her touch and pulled her away from the door and opened it wide. "Now! You need to leave \_ no\_w ."

He pushed her, still protesting, out of the small workshop and locked the door from the inside as he muttered something about "Finna" and "closed doors."

Astrid, feeling a cold loss and a small twinge of annoyance, wondered if she would ever understand his reasoning for anything .

\* \* \*

><p>He pushed his wide sleeves up to his elbows and they fell around his wrists again. The lower hem of his robe had collected more dirt and mud than he had ever thought possible, and he wished with all irreverence that he did not have to wear his robes when in public.<p>

Not that he really was in public, for no one else was around in the forest, a fact that was a great pity, for Jehan was terribly lost.

Brother Martinus had come down with a spell of stomach pains and had sent him to the village for some sort of tonic or tincture that might dull the cramping, as the frequency of his pains had been increasing of late and he had gone through his supply of remedies brought from Normanz. The surgeon had brushed off Jehan when he had asked for help, claiming he did not have time to take care of monks when he had an entire army to assist. And thus Jehan had been sent on this mission, though he honestly had no idea how he would find the village or make his way back to the abbey.

He turned around and looked back the way he had come, though he saw no sort of visible path. Well, if he continued to walk straight, he would eventually find something...He would probably make it to the sea and the Norsemen, who, if they did not skin him or sacrifice him to their gods as they were rumoured to do, might help him find his way. He looked up at the sky and shielded his eyes as he started to walk backwards. The sun was high, but it was past noon. He had missed the midday meal.

His back slammed into a tree, and he turned around quickly as he figured he should look where he was going...And he saw that he had not backed into a tree at all. He had backed into a girl, a blonde girl who was kneeling down and picking up an overturned basket and several bunches of leaves and flowers...Oh, dear.

"I am so sorry!" Jehan knelt next to her and started picking up stems. "Excuse me. Let me help you with that." Several of the leaves he knew from having worked in the gardens in the abbey back in Normanz. As he worked, he cast a side glance at the girl. She had a

pleasant enough face and a light smattering of freckles across her nose. She was dressed simply, in grey and brown.

He realized her head was uncovered. The Norman women occasionally went uncovered or wore loose veils, but he had noticed that the Anglo-Saxon women never walked about without their hoods. In fact, the only other Anglo-Saxon woman he had seen without a hood had been the girl from the other day. He wondered if it were a mark of profession.

Whether or not that were the case, she must know her way about. "I was wondering if you could help me, actually." He rose and brushed leaves off the front of his robe.

The girl stood as well, but took a step back when she saw him. "Munuc..." She set her features and stared hard at him.

Of course. She probably had not understood a word he had been saying. Feeling foolish, he attempted, "Um...Do you know...Uh...bur...burd?" That was not the right word. Oh, she was very good at that glare, much better than he would have thought, since her voice was sweet and high. "No...burk..."

The girl's expression faltered and she giggled. "Burg?"

He grinned. "Yes! Where is burg?"

She seemed to consider him for a moment before her smile widened. "Where is the village?"

"Oh." He felt very foolish indeed. "Yes. Sorry. I didn't realize youâ€œ"

"That way," she said as she pointed to his left. "There is the road. Go right."

"Oh. Thank you." He was about to leave, but he hesitated. "Is there an apothecary?"

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"An apothecary?" He scratched his neck. "Herbalist?"

She shook her head.

He supposed she did not understand as much as he had originally thought. "Oh, I'm making a mess of this...Help...um...bot!" He was glad he had taken the time to attempt some of the Anglo-Saxon texts, even if he had only managed a few words.

"Road," she repeated. "Go right."

"No!" He looked up at the sky and wished the angels could write words in the clouds. "See...My friend. My...um..." He knew this word. He knew he knew this word. "Wine? He is sick. Adlig."

The girl cocked her head. "Adlig means sick?"

"Yes. I believe." Jehan shrugged. He had probably pronounced it wrong and she had mistaken it for another word. "I'm not positive

ifâ€"

"How sick?"

"It's not too terribleâ€"

"How is friend sick?" she clarified.

"Oh. The um..." He had not learned any parts of the human anatomy, so he gestured to his stomach.

The girl nodded. "Come with me." She started walking in the direction she had told him the road lay.

Jehan hurried behind her. "Thank you." After a few minutes of tripping over roots and brush, he cleared his throat. "Do you live in the village?"

"No," she replied simply.

"I see," he said. Perhaps she lived on the outside on a farm. Did farmers owe anything to a lord in this region? Did lords even exist in Strathclyde? He had not seen or heard of any. Ever since the king of the Scots had sworn fealty to Willame, the true king of England, Jehan had heard nothing of land owning lords. They certainly had not received opposition from any lords or their men. If the town was not associated with a lord, who had paid for the new chapel? "Do you attend mass in the village?"

"I do not follow the Christian god."

She had not said it harshly, but the response still surprised him. He had never before met someone who did not follow God. Then again, he had been raised by monks. Perhaps she was one of the Norsemen, still following their pagan gods. But did the Norsemen speak the Anglo-Saxon tongue? He supposed that if they lived so close, they must. It would be beneficial for trade. And it was beneficial to him as he sought more knowledge. Perhaps the girl would help him in more ways than one.

He bent down and picked a small flower, one with a big yellow center and dozens of little white petals. "What's this?" he asked.

She turned and looked at the flower in his hand and she raised her eyebrow. "A flower."

Oh. He felt stupid. He should have been clearer ... "But what do you call it?"

She raised both eyebrows and her mouth fell open slightly. "What I call...blostma. DÃ|gÃ@ge."

"DagÃ@g," he repeated.

"DÃ|gÃ@ge," she said with a small smile.

He took a deep breath. "DÃ|gÃ@ge."

"Yes." She laughed and turned and started walking. After a few minutes, they reached the wide foot-beaten road and she turned to the

right. He walked next to her and muttered his newfound word to himself.

The girl led them up a small path that broke from the road and wound through the trees.

Jehan bent over and picked a different flower, one with bright red petals. He knew this one. It was a poppy. The brothers often used them in sleeping draughts. Just to be certain he had the pronunciation right, he held up the flower and repeated, "Dã|gã@ge."

The girl laughed. "No. Popig." She pointed to the poppy. "Blostma." She picked two different flowers from her basket and pointed to one. "Blostma." She pointed to the second. "Blostma." She pointed to the poppy again. "Popig."

Oh. Blostma meant flower. Dã|gã@ge and Popig were types of flowers. That made sense. "Blostma." He waved at the trees as they walked. "And all this?"

The girl cocked her head. "The forest?"

"Yes."

"Wudu."

"Wudu," he repeated. "Wudâ€" He was cut off when something zoomed over his head. "Ack!"

A winged lizard-like creature, no bigger than his forearm, chased a small bird across the path. The bird darted into a hollow in a tree, and the little reptile whined in protest and released a small burst of flame.

A dragon. It was smaller than the one the soldiers had captured, and it let out small, purring chirps rather than bestial growls.

"Draca."

He looked at the girl, who smiled sweetly and repeated, "Draca."

"Draca," he said back. He smiled and added, "Dragon."

She laughed. "I know." She beckoned him with her hand. "Come." She led them off the path and through the trees to a small clearing where a little, stick house sat.

Well, "house" was generous.

The girl pulled aside a curtain hung in a doorway and slipped inside. He followed and looked around. There was just enough light pouring through the cracks in the walls, and he could see a small bed roll in one corner. Just above the roll hung two cloaks, one brown and one bright red. The only other person he had seen with a red cloak had been the girl who had gone to the monastery the other night. The unbound hair and the colour of the cloak...Perhaps those were marks of profession. He glanced away and continued his observation. The hut



was filled with jars and clay pots and glass vials.

It suddenly occurred to him that the girl might be a witch, that she might have brought him for the sake of killing him or even eating him. He had heard of the Norse witches—seductresses who foretold the future and sacrificed children and enemy peoples to their gods...

And he laughed to himself. He was being ridiculous.

The girl pulled a few leaves from her bag and set them on a table in another corner.

He recognized those. The abbey at home had a garden with a square of mint.

It was hardly a poison.

She pulled some sort of yellow tuber from a clay pot and cut it into tiny squares. A sweet, spicy scent filled the hut. She wrapped the leaves and root in separate pieces of cloth and turned to face him. She held out the parcel of leaves. "Give to friend to eat." She held out the other parcel. "And this...make with water. Hot water." She furrowed her brow. "You know?"

"Yes," he said as he took the cloth packages and tucked them into the leather pouch hanging from his belt. Chew the mint, steep the root. It was simple enough. "Yes, thank you. I really do appreciate it. You've been very helpful."

The girl nodded and snapped her fingers. "And wine."

He leaned forward. "Friend?"

She shook her head. "No, wine." She mimed drinking from a cup.

"Oh!" He nodded. "That wine."

"Red."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure I can secure some. We have plenty in the kitchens back at the old monastery."

The girl smiled. "You talk much."

He laughed before he could stop himself. "Yes, so I've been told." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Silent hours are unbearable." He bit his lip when he realized that she probably had no idea what silent hours were, and he considered explaining. He did not know how well he might explain the concept in their broken language, though, so he said, "Um...I'm called Jehan."

"Jehan," she said quietly. "Munuc Jehan."

"No..." Was that some sort of title? "Just Jehan is fine."

She furrowed her brow again. "You are the munuc."

"Oh!" It was not a title at all. He nodded. "Oh, monk!" \_The\_ monk? He was not the only one...

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. Monk."

He shook his head. "No." When she raised an eyebrow, he continued, "No, I'm just a novice. Well, technically, I've been a Junior since I was sixteen"

"What means novice?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. How was he going to explain the particulars between a monk and a novice? Or between a novice and a Junior? "I'm not a full monk yet, see. I will be when I go home in a few months." He smiled. "And I've wanted to be. I mean, I was raised by the brothers. And this whole trip over here is part of our training. We're encouraged to go through a period of evangelistic work before we take our permanent vows." He shrugged. "I've taken vows, of course, but those have to be renewed every year..." He stopped when he noticed her blank stare. "You don't know what I'm saying."

The girl shook her head. "No." She grinned at him. "I am Ymma."

"Ymma." She had a nice smile. Her teeth were crooked, but it was nice and friendly.

"Jehan."

He smiled back.

Talking with a complete stranger was not so hard.

This girl...Ymma...She could help him. He thought about all he could learn from her. The language, the culture...And if she did not worship God, then perhaps she was one of the Norsemen. He could learn that language as well.

But it was getting late. He had been sent on a quick errand, but he had been absent for at least two hours. "Um, where is the abbey? Oh..." He knew that word. He knew that he knew that word. "Monster?"

She raised both eyebrows. "Mynster?"

"Yes!" He suddenly wondered if his mispronunciations were actually words. With his luck, they were probably embarrassing ones. He decided he did not want to know.

She stepped out of the hut and beckoned him with her hand. "Come. I show you."

The walk back was fairly silent. He wished he knew more words. He wished he could think of more questions to ask. He wanted to know about her religion, why she did not cover her hair like most Anglo-Saxon women, why she kept a red cloak and what it meant. He had so many questions, but he could not think of a way to ask them without being invasive or potentially offending her. So he said nothing.

After a while, the trees thinned and Ymma stopped at the top of a hill. "There," she said as she pointed ahead.

He stopped beside her. He could make out the stone walls in the distance. It was far, but apparently this was as far as she was willing to go. "Thank you, Ymma." He smiled down at her.

She nodded and folded her arms. For a moment she looking him up and down as if appraising him.

He looked down. No matter how many times it happened, he could never get used to people's staring at him. At home, the brothers passed each other with their heads low. They met eyes in conversation, but there were no lingering glances, no intense gazes. But things were different everywhere he had been since leaving the abbey. The Anglo-Saxons, and even the few Norman wives and daughters who had accompanied the soldiers, would stop and watch him as he passed before returning to giggling and talking.

One would think they had never seen a Junior monk before.

Maybe it was because he wore robes but had not shaved his head yet. He was not supposed to until he had taken his permanent vows, but there was a certain expectation.

"You have good soul," she said suddenly. "I see. I know."

He looked at her again. "Oh?" What did that mean? Was she comparing him against other monks she had met? He doubted she had met many. But he supposed she had meant it as a compliment, so he said, "Thank you."

"I feel the gods tell me," she explained.

Gods. She worshipped multiple gods. He had suspected, of course, but...

"Are you one of the Norsemen?" he asked.

"No." She opened her mouth to say more, but she closed it again.

"I see," he said, though he did not see at all. Perhaps if they spoke the same language they might have been able to talk longer. "Thank you, Ymma."

She nodded with a smile. "Jehan." And then she disappeared back into the shadow of the forest, and he started toward the monastery to give Brother Martinus his remedies.

\* \* \*

><p>"We don't even know if they're going to attack! Baldi said they've kept to themselves since they made the treaty. Maybe they just want to come and learn in peaceâ€" "<p>

"And once they learn, what do you think they'll do, Hiccup? I suppose you think they'll start doing tricks in the skyâ€" "

"No, I don't! But Iâ€" "

"Now, Spitelout, Hiccup may be right. They may not be so foolish as to use our own weapon against us."

"If they have enough men, they might, Phlegma!"

Stoick pulled on his beard as he watched his son defend his points to a room of angry Vikings. Years before, no one would have paid Hiccup any heed, but he had gained respect after ending a three century war. Hiccup had a voice.

Unfortunately, the rest of the room had voices too, and all the voices created a droning, deafening scream that frequently drowned out Hiccup.

The boy's brow was furrowed and his eyes were narrowed and his mouth was set in a grim line. He was frustrated. And with good reason. He was trying very unsuccessfully to pound reason and thought into the heads of almost one hundred frightened men and women.

And they were indeed frightened. The rumour of an army of ten-thousand men had circulated quickly, along with the rumour that a fifth of the men might be headed to Berk to find Hiccup. Even that force was ten times the entire population of Berk. And out of terror, the Vikings, led by Stoick's own brother-in-law, had called for a preemptive strike.

Hiccup stood almost alone, backed only by a few seasoned warriors and begging the village to consider waiting.

Hiccup pressed his hands on the table. "I just think that if we expect a war, we'll attack them as soon as we see them! And then they will definitely attack us!" People called out assent or dissent while he continued, "They'll defend themselves!" He shook his head. "Look...We've made that mistake beforeâ€"

"People aren't dragons!" Spitelout shouted. "We can't just get rid of their leader and hope we can all be friends!"

"That doesn't mean we can't try to understand them firstâ€"

"You would have us sit and drink with them!" someone cried.

"If that's what it takes!" Hiccup shouted back.

Baldi had said they had a treaty. But his girl had made it perfectly clear that she did not trust the soldiers to uphold that treaty. Stoick did not know what to think, as he had only recently heard of the developments.

Spitelout shook his head. "Never have I known a Viking who was against fightingâ€"

Hiccup clenched his hands into fists. "I'm notâ€"

Phlegma put a hand on his shoulder. "Peace is not always an option, Hiccup."

"I'm just saying that if there are alternativesâ€"

Spitelout laughed. "This is the most ludicrous thingâ€"

"â€"then we should take them!" Hiccup continued over him. "If they

tryâ€"

"Do you want us to not be prepared? What aboutâ€"

"â€"to kill us all, fine! We'll attack them in turn!"

"â€"the Viking way?"

"We'll do what it takes to defend our people and our families!"  
Hiccup threw his hands out. "But you have to realize that these are men, just like we are! They have wives and families too!"

Stoick smiled. His son had all of the compassion and goodness of his mother, and all the stubbornness of his father. He would be an excellent chief one day, but he still had a lot to learn about appeasing both sides during an argument.

"You put their families before our own?" another man asked.

"No, Iâ€"

"So you suggest we let them hurt us and possibly our children before we attack themâ€"

Hiccup pressed hand against his head. "You forget that these men may have children! If we attack them, how are we any better?"

"That doesn't meanâ€"

"People!" Stoick called as he rose from his seat. The debate had continued long enough. It was time for a solution. "Maybe my son is right. Maybe Spitelout is right. Maybe they don't mean us harm. Maybe they do. The fact is we know nothing about them or their intentions, save the fact that they want..." He trailed off.

Hiccup stiffened and bowed his head.

"So what do we do?" someone asked.

"We can't just wait and expect nothing," someone else said.

"We have to prepare for something."

"We should ask the \_vÃ¶lva\_."

"No," said Boffer Hofferson. "This is a political matter. We should seek the \_hofgoÃ¶i\_."

"But the chief has to go," a woman said.

"We can't spare Stoick," someone said. "What if they come in the time he's gone?"

"I can go," Hiccup murmured. He cleared his throat and said louder, "I'll go."

The Great Hall grew quiet again and Stoick nodded. "Hiccup will go." The matter was closed.

As the Vikings filed out the doors, Hiccup sat down again and stared

hard at the table. "The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ told you you'd have many sons, Dad."

"I know," Stoick said. The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ had been wrong about many things. "And I think, you're right, Son. We should let them make the first move. It's just..." He looked watched the exiting people and sighed. Letting Hiccup go was honestly the best option. For, if indeed the Normans did arrive during that time, he would not be around. He coughed. "Some would feel better with something. People still put stock in it." Stoick would not admit to his practically-minded son that he was one of those people. The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ could not be expected to perfectly interpret the will of the gods, as he was merely a man. And he had predicted that the chief would have many sons, but Stoick would disagree with Hiccup and say that the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ was right. After all, once Hiccup married the Hofferson girl, Stoick would gain four sons-in-law. Five sons was quite a lot, in his opinion.

He patted Hiccup on the back and left with the crowd.

He needed the assurance of the \_hofgoÃ°i\_. He needed to know that the safety of his people, and more importantly his son, was secure .

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup walked toward the door, but he stopped when he felt a heavy hand fall on his shoulder.<p>

"Going so soon, Hiccup?"

He turned and found himself staring into blue eyes. Hofferson blue. All the boys looked exactly the same, round faces and sharp features and wide smiles and yellow hair, and they were almost impossible to tell apart. Datter had the longest beard, Cloutbeard the next longest, Splinter the next and...

"Grimefoot!" Hiccup smiled back. He was Astrid's closest brother in age, and he was also her favourite. Hiccup's eyes wandered to the axe resting on Grimefoot's shoulder and swallowed. That grin did not seem so friendly anymore. "That's a nice axe," he ventured.

Grimefoot laughed and slapped Hiccup's shoulder. "Of course! You made it!" He swung the axe down and hefted it. "I'm a bit rusty on my skills, though..."

Hiccup seriously doubted that. Was Grimefoot about to ask him to train? He hoped not. Astrid had once tried to teach him how to wield an axe, and it had been disastrous. He was not half bad with a sword, though, and he figured he would stick with that.

A man with a slightly longer beard walked up behind Grimefoot. "That's what happens when you have nothing to work with!" Splinter said.

"No wars. No conflicts," said an identical man with an even longer beard. He did not have a myriad of scars on his face, so Hiccup guessed that he must be the oldest, Datter. "No moving targets."

Someone slapped Hiccup's back. "Don't worry! We may have a war yet!"

That was Cloutbeard, the man who had made the phrase "it's only fun if you get a scar out of it" not only his motto, but also his life mission. He had plenty of visible scars to speak of, and Hiccup could only guess at how many he could not see.

Datter put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder and he and Cloutbeard started directing Hiccup toward the end of the table where Stoick and Hiccup had sat during the meeting. "Don't look so glum, Hiccup!"

Glum? Who was glum? Potential war was great news. Hiccup attempted a smile.

"We'll know soon enough!" Cloutbeard said. "All thanks to you!"

Splinter grabbed Stoick's high-backed chair and turned it around. "And while we've got you here..."

The older brothers spun Hiccup and pushed him into the chair hard.

Grimefoot grinned. "We want to talk to you."

Hiccup looked at the four brothers, who stood casually in front of him, and pressed himself against the back of the chair and swallowed. "Oh?" While they had him there? While they had him trapped there, more like.

Grimefoot nodded and leaned forward. "We've been hearing rumours."

"About you," Cloutbeard said.

Rumours? Hiccup could not imagine what rumours they were speaking of. There were rumours about him? Rumours about what?

"And our little sister," Splinter said.

Grimefoot raised an eyebrow. "About you with our little sister."

Oh. Those rumours. Had they found out that they had spent nights in each other's rooms? Not doing anything, just sleeping, but...Well, he was not dead yet, so they probably had not heard anything about that.

Datter smiled brightly. "Congratulations, by the way."

Cloutbeard nodded. "We're sure you're delighted."

Delighted? Anxious, definitely. Glad that he was marrying her rather than some girl he had never met. A little excited because he loved her and he knew she loved him as well. But delighted? He had not even begun to recover from the shock of finding out the marriage was happening at all. He was not exactly sure how he really felt about anything yet. Maybe, in a few days, when he had finally processed everything he would be delighted, but... "Well, Iâ€"

"You'll be making the handsal tonight, right?" Datter asked.

Hiccup wondered why he was asking. As far as he knew, the brothers had volunteered to be witnesses to the official betrothal ceremony.

"Promising to respect her and not dishonour her," Splinter added.

Cloutbeard leaned forward. "We know you'll keep every promise you make."

Hiccup looked at the doors quickly. He was not planning to break his oath, so why was this necessary? "I don'tâ€"

Grimefoot suddenly slapped his hand against the wood above Hiccup's head. "Every promise."

Hiccup swallowed.

"That you won't dishonour her in any way," Datter said.

"That you won't touch her until that night," Splinter added.

Cloutbeard smiled. "Or do anything that even looks suspicious."

Grimefoot pushed himself off the chair. "Because if you do..."

Cloutbeard shrugged. "Well, use your imagination."

Grimefoot frowned and looked at the axe in his hand with peculiar interest. "I really am rusty. I could do with some target practice."

Cloutbeard slapped his brother on the back. "We all could."

Datter grinned and started walking toward the door. "Bye, Hiccup! Have a nice trip!"

Cloutbeard jogged after him. "Bring back some good news, eh?"

Splinter nodded and made his way toward the exit. "We'll keep an eye on Astrid for you!"

Grimefoot crossed his arms and smiled. "Of, course, we'll do that even after you're back." He turned and followed his brothers and called over his shoulder, "Good luck, Hiccup!"

Hiccup waited for the doors of the Great Hall to close before he released a breath. "That...was subtle," he murmured. He pressed his shaking hands against the arms of the chair and pushed himself to his feet.

He had not been planning anything. Really, he had not. But he had just been threatened by four men the size of his father, four men who were to become his brothers-in-law, and he was not feeling particularly steady.



Brothers-in-law.

Because he was marrying their sister.

In four months.

Which, when he thought about it, was not a long time at all.

He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth as a horrible, sick feeling filled his stomach and pricked at the back of his head. It suddenly occurred to him that he was not ready.

He shook his head. Of course he was not ready. He had only just found out about it. Surely he would be ready when the time came. He had wanted to marry her for almost ten years.

He was only feeling anxious because he had just been cornered by all four of the Hofferson boys.

Right?

He needed to clear his head. He needed to get away just for a bit, maybe a few hours at most. He needed...He needed Toothless. A long ride with his best friend while the sun set was exactly what he needed.

He walked out of the Great Hall and started toward his house, where his dear friend was doubtless waiting for him. He had not been walking five minutes when he heard a clear, low laugh and he turned to see Astrid chatting happily at Stormfly.

She looked beautiful with her cheeks flushed from flight and her hair wind-blown out of its braid. She always looked beautiful, of course.

She looked up and saw him, waved, and jogged to him. "Hiccup!"

Well, a flight would have to be delayed for a few minutes at least. "Hey." He had not seen her since that morning, and when he looked at her, her eyes bright and hair mussed, he could not help remembering...

She slugged him lightly on the arm. "Up for a race tomorrow? I was thinking about getting everyone together. Stormfly's been getting faster. She's probably caught up to Toothless in speed."

The claim was so ridiculous that he had to laugh. "You've been spouting that nonsense for years."

She rolled her eyes.

"I can't." He frowned and sighed. "I'll be gone."

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You never said. Where are you going?"

"The hof. It was just decided." He bit his lip and decided that this was not the place to mention that an army of potentially blood-thirsty men was on its way for him. Maybe later, when he had a

plan for how to deal with the future and when she was not in such a good mood. He really loved her smile, and he was loathe to spoil it with rumours of war. "We need guidance on a little issue."

For a moment, she looked as if she wanted to ask what the issue was, but she shrugged. "You won't be taking Toothless, I guess."

"No." Tradition stated that the journey had to be made by ship and by foot. One could not travel by horse or any other animal. The trip would take him at least a couple days without Toothless, who most likely would not be happy to be left behind. "I can't."

"I'll come too!" she said brightly.

Hiccup shrugged. "I guess..." He suddenly recalled that morning and his more recent confrontation with her brothers. "Wait..."

"We can ask about...well..." Her cheeks and ears turned pink.

Gods, she even blushed adorably. And she would kill him if he ever admitted to thinking so.

"Our marriage," she finished. "Anything we should avoid."

Right that. The sick feeling was back, and he felt the strangest urge to suggest avoiding the marriage in general, but he brushed the thought aside. It was an unfamiliar and unwelcome one. The real problem, he knew, was her crazy family. "Anything that even looks suspicious," they had said. Surely going off on a multi-day trip counted as suspicious.

"You know. Important questions..."

"Seeking the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ for a wedding?" he said with a forced laugh. "That's a little unorthodox."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "It's \_us\_, Hiccup. We're going into it already loving each other. How much more unorthodox can it get?"

Well, she had a valid point, andâ€"No. He was not going to let her argue her way into coming. She was not going to win this. His life was at stake. "I mean..." He tried desperately to think of something, but his mind kept seizing on her family. "Would your parents..."

"Sure." She waved a hand. "That's not even a problem. Besides, you'll end up wanting another person who can help with rowing, making camp, cooking and all that."

"Hm. I think I'll pass. Considering your record, I'm not sure cooking is your calling."

"Ha ha," she said with an annoyed look.

He grinned at her. He was teasing, of course. He was certain that whatever she made on the road would be just fine. Probably even delicious. Because after the infamous Yak-Nogg incident...Well, she was Astrid, after all, and Astrid would never fail twice at anything.

He was not worried about food.

He was worried about himself. He was worried because if the events of that morning proved anything it was that he had a hard enough time being alone with her when the entire village was just behind a door. But being alone with her when the nearest person was a day's walk away? He was not sure he could handle that.

He cleared his throat. "I mean, we can't just go off on our own for a couple days." He shrugged. "I mean, it's not exactly conventional."

"Since when do you care about convention?" she asked. "You never care about convention."

And then there was the matter of her four axe-happy brothers. "But I don't just break rules like this!"

"Yes, you do. You always do." She frowned. "What's with you?"

He glanced away. "Nothing."

"Hiccup." She crossed her arms and furrowed her brow. "If you don't want me to come, just say so."

Oh, no. "It's not that I don't want you. Gods, that's not it at all. I just...I don't think it's the best idea, considering..."

"Considering what, Hiccup?"

He looked up and back at her. "Considering...Um..."

After a few seconds of silence, Astrid shook her head. "Forget it. You don't want me to go along. I get it." She looked away.

"Wait." He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "Astrid..."

"No," she said with a small smile. "It's fine. You clearly don't want me around, and I should have picked up on thatâ€"

"Of course I do!" he cried as he grabbed her other shoulder as well.

"On the trip, I mean." She shrugged his hands off and turned away. "And that's fine. I was being stupid. Of course you need time to yourself."

She was not angry. No, it was worse than that. He was very well-verse in the art of handling Astrid when she was angry. He was not, however, confident in his abilities to handle her when she was sad. If he could make her see... "Wait! Astridâ€"

He stopped when she raised her hand to wave at someone down the hill. He peered over her shoulder and saw Grimefoot, who was watching them.

"Hey, Hiccup!" the young man called.

Astrid looked at Hiccup and smiled as if to insist that her brother liked him.

Hiccup was not so certain, but he waved back tentatively.

Grimefoot stood grinning at him for a few seconds longer than Hiccup thought necessary before he continued on his way.

Astrid cleared her throat. "I'll just...I'm sure you have a lot to do beforeâ€" "

"Have you talked to any of your brothers today?" he asked. He had to know, not only for himself but also so he could explain to her why he was so apprehensive about letting her join in a trip they normally could have taken together.

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "What does thatâ€" "

"Have you talked to any of them since this morning?"

"Why this mornâ€" "

He grabbed her arms and looked into her eyes. "Have you?"

"Hiccup!" she said, exasperated. "Stop interrupting me! Yes. I saw Grimefoot earlier. I always see him. And I talked with Datter for a bit when I went to his house to find Kata."

"What did you tell them about this morning?" He honestly did not know if he would ever feel safe even kissing her again without checking every hiding place within a mile.

She shook her head. "Why would I tell them anything about this morning? That's not their business. Why would you think I've said anything about us?"

"They cornered me," he said as he released his grip on her arms. "They cornered me in the Great Hall and they threatened me."

Astrid's mouth fell open slightly. "What?"

He waved a hand in the air. "Stuff about keeping promises and honouring you and not touching you until we're married and not doing anything that looks wrong and all that."

"They threatened you?"

"What did you tell them?"

Astrid took a step back and held her hands up. "I didn't tell them anything! I didn't even mention that I had seen you! Why are you so hung up on this morning anyway? I mean, we kissed. A lot. But that's hardly unusual. Sure it was more intense than..." She shrugged. "But I didn't say anything. And even if I had, I don't see any reason for their attacking you."

"Threatening," Hiccup said.

Astrid rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Whatever. I don't see a reason. I mean, what happened this morning wasn't...unwelcome. Actually, it was great." She laughed quietly. "\_Really\_ great. It ended pretty abruptly, though. And I've been meaning to ask you..."

Oh, no.

"Why didâ€"

He shot her a look that he hoped contained everything he did not want to admit out loud.

Her eyes widened and she brought a hand up to cover her mouth. "Oh." Her cheeks started to turn pink again.

Adorable. "See?"

She looked at the ground. "Yeah. I...I think I got it." She looked up at him after a few seconds. "I didn't say a word. Honest."

He furrowed his brow. "You have no idea why theyâ€"

"Hiccup, I have no idea why my brothers do anything," she said with much less embarrassment.

"Oh." Well, he felt stupid. So the two incidents were completely unrelated. His eyes snapped to hers and he grinned. "You thought it was great?"

"I mean..." She shrugged and smiled shyly. "Yeah?"

"Oh." Well, that was excellent news. He had certainly enjoyed it, and he was sure he would enjoy it again, though he was not so sure how he would enjoy being slowly mutilated by her siblings. He sighed. "It's not a matter of not wanting you to come along. I do. Asking about the...uh...marriage is a pretty good idea." The subject was still very new and awkward, he knew. That was obviously why he had such a hard time saying it. "I just don't think that it's the best idea if the two of us...I mean, because your brothers..." They were not the only problem, of course, but he was not about to admit aloud that he was worried about himself and how well he could handle living with her for two days. Just the two of them. Alone. "Well, your brothers might..."

"Might kill you," she finished. "Right." She furrowed her brow for a moment before smiling. "What if we took someone else? I'm sure Fishlegs can go!"

"Yeah." It was a good idea. A very good idea. Her brothers could not find anything worth killing him over if they brought a third party. "Yeah! That sounds great!"

"Great!" She folded her arms across her chest. "You know you can always tell me when you do want to be alone."

He nodded. "Right."

She punched him in the arm.

"What was that for?" he demanded as he rubbed the spot. She could hit rather hard.

"For being an idiot," she explained.

Hiccup rolled his eyes and leaned forward in anticipation. A few moments passed, and when she had not moved, he raised his eyebrows and smiled slightly.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"Well, you kind of owe me," he said.

Astrid snorted and turned away. "I don't owe you anything."

He grabbed her arm and spun her around and kissed her the way he had that morning, and when they pulled back, both of them breathless, she hugged him tight. They did not fit just so; she had to duck her head a bit and he had to crane his neck slightly so he could rest his chin on her hair, but it was still perfect in its own right.

"I should refuse to kiss you more often," she said.

He frowned. "I don't like that idea."

Astrid pulled back suddenly and looked up at him. "What does 'closed doors' mean?"

"What?" he asked, keeping his arms around her.

"This morning," she said. "You said something about Finna and 'closed doors' after you pushed me out."

He turned his head toward the sky, begging the gods to intervene in some way and deter that conversation, for it was not one he was anxious to have. "Oh, man ."

## 5. Chapter 5

**\*\*Yes, I deleted the random translated chapter. The chapter that was Gizoogled. If you miss it terribly...I'm sorry. I know some of you enjoyed it, but I only ever intended for it to be temporary.\*\***

**\*\*Also, I'm going to explain the sporadic nature of the first few chapters. It all comes down to when I actually have time to write. And since I work three jobs (one of which is full-time) and since I am a full-time student at one of the 30 most stressful schools in America, time is a rare commodity. I spend the majority of my free time sleeping or trying to maintain my social life, which leaves very little time at all for writing. And I was planning to get this out about three weeks ago, but a family crisis cropped up that completely took away all of my attention and made all of my emotional energy plummet. I've also been very lackadasical in responding to reviews (I try my best to respond to every signed review within 24 hours, since I don't ask for readers or reviews and that makes the ones I do have all the more special; and if I were to respond to every anonymous...My notes would be half the chapter), and I do apologize for that. I'm also afraid to say that due to the nature of the issues**

I'm currently handling (or not handling, depending on how you look at it), updates will continue to be very spaced out.\*\*

\*\*Thanks to peacelight24 for being a wonderful Beta and a constant source of support! You're wonderful! And thanks to hiccupp for being another source of support and for being a perfect distraction!\*\*

\*\*Chapter 5: Message\*\*

He stared down at the gold band in his hand. His other hand held her fingers tightly.

Everything had been exactly so. The swords brought out with the rings, nothing had fallen over, and Gobber had even woken up on time, which was a first. But as he stood there holding her hand with the ring he had made himself, he had a deep and horrible thought that things were about to go terribly, awfully wrong.

Of course, things always went wrong for him. The last three years and four months of his life had clearly been a fluke.

Because he was Hiccup, and his name insisted that he was a mistake. She had always rolled her eyes when he brought it up. She had insisted that names did not have a bearing on one's destiny. And he had wondered at that, for if the gods chose a man's destiny from birth to death, why would they not choose a name of significance? Besides, it was easy for her to say such things. Her name meant "favourite of the gods."

He realized how ridiculous he was being. Insecurity had not haunted him for years. Maybe immediately after finding acceptance, but for two years he had hardly considered it...

She smiled at him, waiting for him to slide the ring onto the finger, waiting for him to actually make her his wife.

He had to sudden urge to let go, as if her touch had burned him, but he just held tighter as his hands began to sweat.

Oh, for the love of Thor, it was simple! He just had to slide the ring onto her finger, say the stupid words and it would be over! It was easy.

There was no reason to be anxious.

It was Astrid, for Odin's sake. Why was he so frightened?

Stupid question.

He met her eyes and felt that same rush of love and contentment and excitement he always felt when he saw that lovely blue colour. She was still smiling her beautiful smile as she looked at him. She was all perfection, as was right on her wedding day, but there was a little crease between her brows where they were knit together.

He just stood there stupidly, watching her watching him watching her expression slowly become more and more confused.

He looked at his father and the vǫlva, standing by and presiding

over the ceremony. His father nodded and the vǫlva smiled encouragingly.

He looked back at Astrid, who was frowning.

She leaned forward. "Hiccup...What's wrong?"

What was wrong? He was only getting married, for crying out loud. He had been preparing for this for months.

And those months had really flown by. He honestly did not feel prepared at all.

But what did that matter? Astrid was new to the whole marriage business, too. They could figure it out together, right?

"Son?"

He looked up, but his father had disappeared and been replaced by Gobber's sheep, Phil. Hiccup took a step back.

What in the name of Hel...

"Son?" Phil said. "Is everything alright?"

"Hiccup?" Astrid whispered as her fingers tightened on his.  
"Hiccup..." Her voice shook.

She was afraid. She was genuinely afraid of what he might do.

And honestly, so was he.

"Get on with it!" someone shouted from the audience.

He looked out at the crowd and his eyes fell on her brothers, all wielding Terrible Terrors like swords, ready to attack him if he took one step out of line.

"What are you waiting for?" someone else called. Snotlout.

"Hiccup," Astrid murmured as she squeezed his hand. "What is going on?"

The whole crowd started shouting, and Phil the sheep bleated "son" in his father's voice, and the Hofferson boys moved forward with their tiny dragons and the vǫlva started to laugh. His heart was pounding and he found it impossible to breathe.

If only he could just...If only this were not happening.

"Hiccup, just do it!" she said. "It will be fine! I know you're nervous..."

No, nervous did not being to cover how he felt.

"We can figure it out together..."

But he did not want to figure it out.

He did not want to get married.



But he had to, because he had come so far.

So, with fear invading his senses and with the entire island shouting at him and with his beautiful bride encouraging him, he did the only logical thing.

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, the biggest screw-up Berk had ever seen, turned and ran.

At least he lived up to his reputation.

A cry of rage rose from her family as he ran from the Great Hall and the crowd started to pursue him. He glanced back and noted that his father had appeared again, this time riding Phil the sheep and wielding a hammer above his head.

That was great.

He started running faster, not letting up until he had entered his house and closed the door behind him.

He took several deep breaths.

Astrid was going to kill him. Her brothers would try to kill him too, but she would get to him first, and if she did not, she would make some sort of trade with the gods and bring him back and kill him again.

He walked into the middle of the main room and leaned against a wooden pillar.

His immediate future was not looking very bright.

Suddenly, there was a loud banging behind him and splinters of wood flew into his back and around his ears.

He whipped around and saw her standing in the doorway, now bereft of the actual door, save for two broken boards still attached to the hinges.

Astrid walked in calmly and spun her axe in her hand. "Everything alright, Hiccup?"

Her calm terrified him more than the fact that she was covered in blood.

No, the blood definitely scared him more, because he somehow knew whose it was.

"Where's Toothless?" he asked.

She grinned as a horrible madness entered her eyes and she raised her axe above her head and let out a shrill war cry.

"Astrid!"

She ran forward as he screamed her name and begged her to stop.

She swung her axe down above his headâ€

And he opened his eyes and sucked in his breath so quickly and sharply that his chest hurt.

He just lay in bed for a moment, waiting for his breathing to slow and for reality to settle around him.

What time was it? Eternal summer light made knowing almost impossible.

More importantly, what was wrong with him?

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "What in Hel's name..."

He had not even been engaged officially for more than a few hours. It was far too early to be having wedding nightmares.

It was just the newness of it all, he decided. Nerves had to be normal so early on.

His father had always mentioned how apprehensive Valka had been about their wedding.

Of course, Hiccup's mother had not wanted to marry his father. She had not loved him at first.

"At first," Hiccup assured himself. He already loved Astrid, and Astrid already loved him. No apprehension was necessary. Of course he wanted to go through with it. Of course he wanted to marry Astrid. He had wanted to marry her for as long as he could remember.

And he had four months still.

So why did he feel so...anxious?

There was only one thing he could think to do.

He sat up and grabbed his tunic off the end of the bed and pulled it over his head. He then pulled his prosthetic from beneath the bed and attached it to his stump and tightened the leather straps around his shin and his knee. He stood up and snatched his vest off the bed post and made his way down the steps and out the door. He looked up at the sky and noted the sun's position.

Yes, it was very early yet. No one would be awake for several hours at least.

"Toothless?" he called out.

The great dragon did not give any sort of response, so Hiccup walked around to the side of the house where Toothless slept soundly. He always slept outside in the summer, always under the cool breezes of night, but in the winter the big wimp would slither inside and curl up either next to the dying fire or up in Hiccup's loft.

He found Toothless lying on the ground with his arms crossed over his eyes. He nudged him with his metal foot. "Hey, Toothless."

Toothless raised an arm and opened one eye before huffing and

scooting away.

Hiccup pulled the saddle from a hook on the wall of the house. It was the only thing he ever took off. The tail and gears were too complicated to remove every night and attach every morning. "Come on, Bud. We're going flying." He set the saddle on Toothless' back, but the dragon moved away.

"Seriously?" Hiccup tried again to start buckling the saddle, but Toothless scooted further away. "Every morning you wake me up for this."

Toothless grumbled.

"Yeah? Well, now you know how it feels."

Toothless lightly swatted at Hiccup with his tail.

"Stop that. I'm not going to be here for a few days."

Toothless finally opened his eyes and gave Hiccup a lidded glare.

"Don't give me that look."

The dragon slowly rose to his feet and Hiccup buckled the saddle to his back. He tugged the straps tightly to be sure they were secure and quickly clicked the gears and pedals into place. He swung himself into the saddle and secured his foot and prosthetic in the pedals. "Ready?"

Toothless spread his wings. Hiccup pushed the left pedal back, and the dragon shot into the sky.

Hiccup barely paid attention to the flight. He countered weight and leaned whichever way he needed to and adjusted the pedals as his body and muscles read how Toothless moved, but his mind was elsewhere.

It had just been a silly dream, and he was being stupid, getting all worked up over it.

He looked around him and noted that they were above the water and that Berk was far behind them. Hiccup leaned forward and unhooked himself from the saddle. "Alright, Bud. Ready?" He leaned to the side and let himself slide from the saddle and plummet headfirst toward the ocean below.

Now that was exactly what he needed. The feeling of total freedom as he fell, the air biting at his face and pulling him from his thoughts, from his cares, from everything but the feeling of falling.

He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out through his mouth.

Why did he fall down? Why down? Why did things not fall up? Everything seemed to be at rest on the ground. It was the natural way of things, he supposed. Whatever began up always came down. Nothing could stay up for very long.

Toothless let out a screech.

"Uh-huh."

Everything fell down.

Toothless screamed again and Hiccup finally opened his eyes.

Oh. The ocean was coming toward him incredibly fast.

Hiccup reached out and grabbed the saddle and pulled himself into it. Just before they hit the water, he clicked the pedals into place and the pair shot upward.

With his ear, Toothless gave Hiccup a smart whack.

"Yeah, yeah," Hiccup said as he fastened the hooks to the saddle.

He clicked the right pedal back and Toothless leveled for a moment before diving without warning toward the sea.

"Whoa!"

Toothless plunged below the waves for a moment and Hiccup inhaled an absurd amount of water. When the dragon emerged from the ocean, Hiccup blew through his nose, coughed hard, and shook his head.

"I guess I deserve that." He coughed again and pinched his nose, the inside burning from the raw salt.

Toothless looked back at him and Hiccup noticed that the dragon had several fish hanging by their tails in his teeth.

"Oh. Right."

Toothless had not had breakfast. Neither of them had.

He looked up and saw a large sea stack ahead. He patted Toothless. "Let's land there, Bud. So you can eat."

Toothless glided to the stack and gently landed and dropped the fish, all flopping and gasping for air, on the ground. He was a skilled hunter, and he had managed to catch six fish in one dive. It was hardly a full meal for the Night Fury, though. He would be eating at least one more basket of fish when they returned to the island.

Hiccup dismounted and pulled his knife from his belt and quickly drove the tip through each fish in turn, just above the eyes, before slicing the gills open. "Eat up."

Rather than dig in, Toothless gently nudged Hiccup with his nose.

The boy patted the dragon on the head. "Don't worry about me, Bud." Hiccup sighed and sat down on the edge of the stack. "I've just got a lot on my mind." He crossed his legs and found himself spilling everything about the dream while Toothless began to eat.

"It just doesn't make any sense, you know? I mean, I've wanted to

marry her for years." Hiccup leaned back on his hands. "And she wants to. She said so."

Toothless gulped down another fish.

"It's just nerves. I only have one shot at this." He uncrossed his legs and let them dangle over the cliff edge.

Only one shot. He did not even know how to be married. Was it something one could learn to be before the actual event?

"And I'm seventeen. That's pretty young. Not for her, most girls get married at her age, but men...We wait a few more years, you know? Usually."

Toothless looked at him blankly.

"I'm just really young." He sighed. "Maybe too young. I mean, I don't feel any older than I felt two years ago. I don't think. It's hard to say."

Toothless nosed a salmon toward Hiccup.

"Thanks, Bud." He picked up the fish and held it in his lap.

After all their time together, Toothless had figured out that Hiccup did not particularly care for regurgitated fish but had not yet realized his impartiality to raw fish.

"I just...Am I even...mature enough to be married?" He laughed and set the fish beside him and brushed his hands over his leggings. "Of course not. I have a problem and I saddle you up like I can just fly away from it all, just like I did when I was fourteen." He looked over at Toothless, who had almost finished off his pile of fish. "And I can't really talk to anyone else about this. I don't feel comfortable talking to Dad or Gobber. And I certainly can't talk about this with her. She wouldn't get it." Astrid was the embodiment of tradition, the girl who always did everything that was expected. And she always did it better than anyone else. It was something he loved about her, but sometimes she saw his views as a break from tradition, and that idea made her uncomfortable.

But he did not want to break from tradition. He just thought traditions could be improved a bit. Like with marriage. Did they have to get married almost as soon as the match was made? Could they not opt to wait for a bit longer?

He shook his head and shrugged. "Ah. I'm gonna be fine. I'll be ready in four months."

He would. He would have to be.

He really had no choice but being ready in four months.

Toothless nudged him with his nose.

"Yeah, you're right." Hiccup swung his legs back onto the stack, stood up, and stretched. "Let's head back. Everyone should be awake by now, and I need to hit the road." Toothless grumbled and Hiccup grinned. "I guess I can put it off for a least a couple of hours."

\* \* \*

><p>The earth almost lurched from beneath her feet once she stepped off the ship. There were no well-constructed docks like there were on Berk. Their ships simply rode right up onto the sand, and the men would pull them until they were safely away from the danger of tides carrying them to sea.<p>

Her home was different from Berk in other ways. It was warmer. The nights actually grew dark even in summer. It was broader, wider, covered with blankets open fields splattered with forested areas and swamp land and deep ravines and cliffs.

Their houses were not so fine, not so perfect and straight. Unlike the Berkians, they had to worry about wood rotting after a few years. Their homes sat between trees and were connected by trodden paths, rather than stone pathways and cart roads.

There were smaller dragons.

There were more flowers.

There were sweeter berries.

And she was so very glad to be home.

Her father dropped into the sand behind her and coughed. The rattling in his chest was worse, most likely heightened by his time breathing in the salty air of the open sea.

Finna turned to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Go rest," she said. "You need sleep."

Her father simply nodded and walked away as he continued to cough.

Finna took a deep breath

"Welcome home," a familiar deep voice said behind her.

She smiled and turned around. Home also meant friends, and friendship was a very good thing indeed. "Did you miss me, Rust?"

He merely gave her a smile that made the skin around his dark eyes crinkle and asked, "How was it?"

"I'm glad to be back," she confessed.

Rust grimaced. "That bad?"

She laughed.

"How's Hiccup?"

She took a deep breath. "Engaged." Yet another good thing about home was the lack of Astrid Hofferson. "And happy." She did not have to think about her, or her with him, or anything like that. She could just pretend none of that existed.

"I'm sorry," Rust said, and she knew that he truly meant it. "And you?"

So much lay in that question. How did she feel about such a development? How did she feel about the other party? How did she feel about anything? "Assured."

"Good."

She turned away and started walking in the opposite direction her father had gone. She should rest, she knew, but she would rather set her mind to more important things. And Rust's presence meant he had returned recently with news from the eastern kingdoms.

"Don't you think you should head home first?" Rust asked as he followed her. "You look exhausted. You should sleep."

"I'm fine," she told him, though she did feel the tiredness of being at sea for so long. But, again, there were more important things to attend to. Sleep could wait. "I just need to think."

"Your mother will want to see you."

Finna clenched her teeth. "She's not my mother," she said. "She's just the bitch fortunate enough to have given birth to me." Or, as it were, unfortunate enough.

"Oh, don't be like that," Rust said. "She does love you."

Finna rolled her eyes, though the gesture was more for her benefit than for his. "She loves what I can do for her. She loves that she could spend years lording me over Ingun and my father." She naturally could not remember the day of her birth, but she had been told the story often enough. After the chief's wife, Ingun, had tried for years to have a child, Finna's father had finally taken a younger woman who had subsequently given birth to a daughter. Finna had loved both of her mothers and her father. Her mother had taken her everywhere, taught her everything she knew about people and the world around them. But after she had grown older and after Ingun had died, Finna had come to realize that her mother's attentions might not have stemmed entirely from love. She had used her daughter as a prop, flaunting the heir to the tribe as the only claim she, a woman of no status, could make. And as the woman had pushed and prodded and asked for favours, conflict had begun to stir between them, and Finna had eventually come to hate her mother. "I'm an asset to her." She shrugged. "I'm a good one, though, I'll admit."

Rust snorted behind her. "Well, aren't you the proud one."

Finna wound her way around the thatch and plank and plaster houses nestled neatly between trees. "That really should not surprise you." She furrowed her brow and frowned. "She can't wait until he goes, you know. My father? She's been asking me about elevating her status for years now." She approached the doors of the Great Hall, and simple, square building that would have looked like any other home had it not been so large. She pushed open the carved wooden door and stepped into the room lit only by dying embers in the central fire.

"Who wouldn't want that?" Rust asked.

Finna made her way to the back of the hall and through a simple door that led into a very dark room. "She's insensitive and opportunistic." Her fingers ran a memorized path and picked up a piece of flint and a chunk of steel and a candle.

"Yes," Rust agreed before adding, "She's your mother."

Finna stepped through the dark and knelt next to the cold hearth and struck the flint against the steel. "I suppose I must get it somewhere." None of her sparks caught, and she felt his hands cover hers and slowly take the tinder away. She stood up as he proceeded to light the fire and blow gently on the sparks and walked over to a table in the middle of the room. She grabbed a roll of paper in the middle of the table and spread it across the wood and held down the edges with her hands. "And I suppose, like her, I'll be a shit mother. And a shit chief."

"Oh, I doubt that," Rust said. The room was slowly growing brighter. He had spent so many years wandering the country for her, picking up bits of information, paying off various peasants and artisans and lords and the occasional clergyman, it really was no wonder he could easily build a fire in so short a time. "Well," he amended, "maybe not the mother bit, but I'm sure you'll do fine at the leading."

She turned and scowled at him as he stood and he simply grinned before dropping the flint and steel into her outstretched hand. She pushed out the rolled edges of the paper again, a map, and set the flint and steel on three of the corners to hold it down.

"Really, though. She is your mother." He thrust the wicked end of the candle into the small flames and letting it catch before holding the blunt end over the heat. "Soon, she may be all you have left." He held out the burning candle.

She took the candle from him and pushed the melted blunt end into a clay bowl and setting it on the fourth corner of the map. "She won't be." Finna smiled. "I'll still have you."

"True," Rust said as he walked around the table and sat in a chair and propped his feet up on the table, his left foot crossing over his right and his right heel covering a sea dragon's head sketched onto the map. "You won't be getting rid of me easily."

Finna raised her eyebrows as she grabbed the toe of his right boot, picked his feet up, and removed them from the table. "Speaking of getting rid of you, is there a reason you're bothering with all this following me around, or are you just bored?" she asked as a sort of invitation.

Rather than answer with information she knew he had, he leaned forward and said, "Quite a few people have been wanting to talk to you."

Finna smiled. "Oh, I love being so popular."

"Maggie and myself included."

Finna crossed her arms. "Go ahead and tell me now. I'll talk with her later."



"The earl of Northumbria was murdered," he said casually.

Finna nodded. "Copsig. Yes, I heard." She leaned forward on her elbow and rested her head in her hand. "Four months ago, was it?" Really, she would appreciate something new.

"No, the one who murdered him. Osulf."

Finna gave a small smile. That was very interesting.

"An outlaw ran him through with a spear."

"Salacious."

"And the new earl, Gospatric, bribed Willame to grant him the earldom."

Finna frowned and straightened and looked down at her map. "So he has control of Northumbria, and he's taking control of Strathclyde..." If he took the western kingdom and the ones in the middle, nothing could stop him from taking their land. Even if the other tribes sent help, it might be too late. She had to take the initiative to protect her people and her way of life. She needed to form alliances while she could, gain information while she could, and acquire strength while she could.

"Apparently," Rust said. "He's buffering the Scots."

Finna scoffed. "The Scots are the ones in need of buffering from him." He was reaching far and wide, and his grip was strong, his shadow dark. She ground her teeth.

Never let it show, her mother had always said. Never let emotion show, never let anyone see. "If you let your feelings show on your face and in your actions" she would say, "then you've let them take over you. If you've let them take over you, you've let them cloud your mind and judgement. Never let your emotion show, and you can think clearly." As much as she despised the woman, Finna had to concede to sound advice. She had made that mistake with Astrid Hofferson, and she was determined to never make it again. She had to think clearly.

This was no longer a game of power between kings. This was the act of a tyrant claiming and grabbing power. This was manifest destiny.

She felt the rage building. "Don't let it show," she murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing." She shook her head and smiled. "What else?"

Rust raised an eyebrow. "He has plans to build a stone castle in the eastern part of London."

Her fingers traced over rivers until they came to rest over the name of the city. "Oh, so he's finally finished taking over abbeys and castles and erecting those silly wooden structures?" Were the castles left behind by the last king not fine enough for him? Was he not already back in Normanz? He did not want a residence, then, but a

statement of power. He would erect something as a symbol of his own strength and influence.

And he would construct more. He would build as far as he could reach.

On an impulse, she snatched her knife from her belt and drove the metal through the word and the map and the table. She glanced at Rust, who had raised both eyebrows, and back at the map. "Numbers?" she asked quietly.

"Ten thousand men, three thousand of those are cavalry," he replied. "Are you alright?"

She cleared her throat and said evenly, "Well, his army seems to be growing by the day. I've heard seven thousand, nine thousand..." Was she alright? She had just stabbed London, after all. People who were alright did not go around haphazardly stabbing cities. "Knowing that numbers grow as rumours do, he probably has half of that." Even so, she would not discredit the account. Preparing for a larger threat would only have positive results. She had made mistakes recently. She had let her guard down regarding personal matters. That girl had noted that some things had escaped her notice. She was determined to never let any of that happen again. She clenched her hands into fists.

"Ten thousand said the soldier," Rust told her. "He was one of the Normans. He's just been stationed in Northumbria. In Hexham." He shifted. "Finna, areâ€"

"Did you pay him well?"

"Yes, butâ€"

"Good," she said. "I doubt His Majesty pays half as handsomely as we do." She took a deep breath and smiled. "Going by that account, we might manage to keep him at bay if our Dane and Swede brothers take our side."

Rust leaned back and shook his head. "The Danes and the Swedes have officially recognized Williame as king."

She slapped her hand on the table. "Well, there goes that plan. Anything else?"

Rust took a few moments to consider his next words. "You're tired. Go to sleep."

She clenched her teeth. "Anything else?"

"Nothing that can't wait," he said. "You really should rest. You're not yourself."

She glared at him, and he met her gaze for a long time before backing down, though his surrender was the result of experience rather than fear.

"Do you want to see Maggie?" he asked in a tone that was almost bored. "She knows more about exact positions. I couldn't really make sense of it all. "

Finna shook her head and stared at the map. "I'll wait." Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she did need to sleep.

"Ymma's here too."

She looked up. "No...I want to see Ymma." She would know more about the soldiers stationed near the tribe. And she more than likely had the tonic for Finna's father. "Go find her."

Rust nodded and sauntered out of the room.

She leaned over the map and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and the first knuckle of her forefinger.

Yes, she needed to sleep. She would be able to sleep later, but rest was not an option. She would not be able to rest until she was assured of safety.

No, rest would not come for many months yet.

\* \* \*

><p>Ymma pushed open the small door and stepped into the glow of the fire and candles. Finna bent over the table, her fingers tracing patterns and her mouth moving silently and frantically.<p>

"Are you talking to yourself?" Ymma asked in the Norse tongue.

Finna did not look up. "Ay coorse. Ah need an intelligent conversation every now an' then, an' Ah dae find Ah fit th' requirements quite nicely."

Ymma shut the door behind her. "Rust told me you wanted to see me."

"Aye." Finna gestured to the chair in front of the table and Ymma took a seat.

She had been in that room so many times. She had sat in that chair and had relayed little pieces of gossip so many times as Finna leaned over the table just so. Usually the other woman spoke first, however, rather than waiting for Ymma to say something, as her silence seemed to indicate.

Ymma cleared her throat to break the silence. Rust had mentioned that Finna was a bit distracted. He had said she was tired. Rust cared for her, looked out for her, was unquestioning in his loyalty to her, as was perfectly right. "When's the wedding?"

Finna jumped slightly and her eyes snapped up. Her mouth opened and closed. "Och." She smiled. "Ye mean mine."

Ymma cocked her head to the side. "Is there another?"

Finna turned her attention back to the map. "Probably after awl thes had blown o'er." She sighed. "It has bin th' longest engagement in Viking history. Two years an' ne'er a date set..." She trailed off and looked down at the map blankly.

Ymma looked to the door. Rust was probably just outside, listening as she had always suspected he had done. Her hand went to her side where the red hood hung from her belt. She fingered the linen. "I met with a girl who managed to get in," she said.

Finna pushed two pieces of flint off the corners of the map and let the paper roll itself into a single scroll. "Really?" She jumped up to sit on the table. "What's 'er service?"

Ymma raised an eyebrow.

"Och." Finna nodded. "Ah see."

"She told me a bit about the soldier who paid for her." Ymma clenched the hood tightly.

Finna nodded slowly.

"Simon, his name was," Ymma added. "And the captain is an honourable man," she said.

Finna rolled her eyes.

Ymma leaned forward. "And she told me about a monk."

Finna waved a hand. "Monks don't interest me. They're rarely political assets. Talk to me about Christians and priests when you meet someone who knows a Cardinal."

"He's a handsome priest." Ymma smiled when Finna gave her a side glance. The other woman had already guessed that she spoke from experience. "She said it was a pity he was a monk." He had been nice, the priest. Curious and open and not at all like she thought a priest would be. Curious, not skeptical, which was good. A curious person was usually fairly gullible, willing to answer questions and ask them without a second thought.

Finna sighed. "Handsome priests interest me about as much as ugly ones do. Which is not at all." She leaned back on her hands. "They actually attempt to hide out their piety, which isn't at all conducive to what Ah do. Can she go in again?"

Ymma bit her lip and pulled the hood into her lap and held it tight with both hands. They had not been friends, but Ymma had been the closest thing the girl had ever had to that. And she did mourn her, if not for her sake, then for the sake of girls like both of them, targeted and killed by a spiteful religion that claimed a god of love and mercy. Hypocrisy. "She was hanged two days ago."

Finna sat up. "Ah see." She furrowed her brow. "Was she a friend?"

Ymma shrugged. "Not really. Rust helped me bury her."

"Ah'm sorry," Finna said with sincerity.

And Ymma knew that she was not sorry that Ymma had lost someone, but that she had not been close enough to truly know the loss. She was sorry for the regret she knew Ymma felt.

Ymma shook her head. "I'm leaving," she said.

"Och?" Finna slid off the table and picked up the candle sitting on a corner of the map. She blew out the flame. "Whaur are ye goin'?"

"Away."

Finne faced her and rolled her eyes and smiled slightly. "Ah gathered tha'. How lang?"

Ymma looked down at the packed floor. Finna was not going to like what she had to say. "Finna, I'm leaving." Ymma looked up and the other woman's smile fell. "I'm not sure where I'm going and I'm not sure how far." She took a deep breath. "But I am sure that I'm not coming back."

Finna drummed her fingers against the table. "Is thes abit yer safety? Coz ay what happened tae th' girl?"

Ymma swallowed in an attempt to rid the stiffness that was forming in her throat. "This is about finding people who worship the old gods like I do."

"You hae us," Finna pointed out.

She did not understand. Ymma had known she would not understand. "You're not my own people, though."

Finna looked down at the table and then back at Ymma. "Ah dornt suppose there's anythin' Ah can say tha' will convince ye otherwise."

Ymma shook her head.

"When?"

"A few days."

Finna cocked her head to the side. "Can Ah at least convince ye tae postpone?"

Ymma smiled. "Most likely not." That was a blatant lie. Finna could think of a million ways to make her postpone.

Finna crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, afair ye go, woolds ye at least dae me a favour?"

There she went with her thinking of things to keep Ymma occupied. Ymma knew Finna could keep her in one place for years if she were creative enough.

"Ah'm gonnae need some poisons, fast-workin' an' strong. A good amount."

Ymma nodded. "I can manage that." It would take a few weeks at most. It was not Finna's best work in coming up with a decent distraction. She stood up to go.

"An' somethin' fur wounds an' infections."

She sat back down.

She really ought to have guessed.

"An' some anesthetics woolds be nice." Finna tapped her chin and smiled down at Ymma. "An' somethin' fur Father. An' Ah..." She stopped when she noticed the red in Ymma's lap. "Ah can't believe Ah didnae notice tha' affair." She looked up. "New hood?"

Ymma shook her head. "It belonged to her."

Finna held out her hand. "May ah?" Ymma handed over the hood and Finna examined the linen closely. "Ye said she found a customer? Simon?"

"Yes."

"Regular?"

Ymma bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm not sure. I don't think she went inside more than once."

Finna ran her fingers over the cloth for a few moments before looking up and striding toward the door. She opened it just a bit and poked her head out. She murmured something, and Ymma could hear Rust's voice answer before the sound heavy footsteps indicated that he was leaving. Finna shut the door and was silent. After what seemed an eternity, she asked, "Dae ye mind if Ah hang ontae this fur a few nights?" She turned to Ymma and smiled. "There's someone fa woolds probably be willin' tae go in."

"That's all?" Ymma asked.

Finna hesitated.

Ymma narrowed her eyes. Finna never hesitated.

"Coolds ye dae somethin' else fur me?" Finna asked quietly. She walked over to Ymma and crouched low. "An' keep it secret? E'en from Rust?"

Ymma sucked in a breath. If Finna was asking her to keep it secret, as if she did not already know Ymma would never say anything...Anything Finna wanted to keep even from her own betrothed could not be a good thing. She wondered exactly who Finna was planning to send in. No, she did not wonder exactly. She already had a feeling. "Finna..."

"Coolds ye make somethin' tha' coolds..." Finna's dark eyes darted to the side. "Somethin' fa coolds end a pregnancy?"

"Finna." She could. Of course, she could. But she wanted a question answered first. She knew the answer, but she just wanted to hear it confirmed. "Whoâ€" "

Finna straightened. "Jist in case." She grinned and brushed her dark, wavy hair out of her face. "Fur th' girl Ah'm plannin' tae send in."

Ymma nodded slowly. "I can." Finna would not answer. When did Finna ever give a straight answer to any question?

"Good." Finna nodded and opened the door again. "That's awl."

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid laced her fingers through Hiccup's as they walked along the ancient path cut through the forest. He ducked his head and laughed quietly as she murmured something and kissed him on the cheek.<p>

Behind them, Snotlout scowled and groaned loudly.

Astrid looked back at him and glared before turning her attention back to Hiccup.

So, they were getting married. Big deal. They did not have to be so obnoxious about it.

He hefted the pack on his back and rolled his eyes.

After all, they had been officially betrothed for not even a day, and people had known about it for even less time.

Astrid laughed at something Hiccup said and leaned in close to him.

He had been stupid to harbour even the tiniest hope of her. She had made it perfectly clear for three years that she wanted only Hiccup, and she had made it perfectly clear that she could not stand Snotlout for much longer than that.

Stupid.

And he had been even more stupid to agree to go on the trek when Hiccup had sprung the proposition on him the night before. Why did he even begin to consider a three day trip? Sure, the worst part, the rowing to the next island, was long over, but he still wished he had opted to stay back on Berk. Like, they needed a chaperone? It was not as if Astrid had to go. Besides, what did he care about some other army invading and Hiccup's marriage to Astrid?

Well, he did care about the war part. And he probably cared about that marriage quite a bit more than he should, though he would never admit it.

It was time to surrender.

Hiccup pulled his hand from hers and slipped his arm around her waist under her own pack.

Snotlout moaned, "I need to get away from you two."

Astrid whipped her head around. "You need to shut up."

Snotlout curled his lip back. "Your carrying on is disgusting."

"Your carrying on is annoying," she said.

"Guys!" Hiccup cried. "Can you not? Please?" He pulled Astrid close to him and whispered something in her ear as she turned her head forward.

Snotlout groaned. "Can you not? Please?"

Astrid stopped in her tracks and turned around. "Oh, gods! I can't believe I have two more days of this," she said, punctuating the last word with a gesture toward Snotlout, who also stopped walking.

Hiccup stopped as well put a hand on her shoulder. "You're engaging just as much as he is," he said calmly.

Astrid crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

Hiccup help up his hands and took a step back. "I just meantâ€"

"Hiccup!" Astrid jabbed a finger at Hiccup's nose and his eyes crossed momentarily. "You invited him!"

Snotlout snickered.

"You know I can't stand being around him!" She looked at Snotlout and smiled slightly. "No offense."

Snotlout huffed and rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah. None taken."

"Well," Hiccup said in that voice he used when trying to calm a restless, angry dragon, which, in all honesty, Astrid was. A restless, angry, fire-breathing dragon. "Well, I thought it might be useful, since he's my cousin and will actually have a hand in tribe affairs soon."

Astrid dropped her arm. "Well, there goes Berk's future."

Snotlout narrowed his eyes and marched up to her. "What's that supposed to mean?" Why had he liked her for so long? Because she was pretty? A shallow reason, but he was the king of shallow reasoning.

Astrid smirked. "Honestly, if it weren't for the sarcasm, I wouldn't believe you two were related."

Snotlout ground his teeth. Sure, he took after his father rather than his mother, Stoick's only sister, and Hiccup clearly took after his own mother, but what did that matter? "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Hiccup's smart for one thingâ€"

"I am plenty smart!" Why did everyone always go on about how smart Hiccup was? It was as if that was all anyone saw in him, and they had placed all that smartness on a stupidly high pedestal, and if you were not smart like Hiccup was smart, you were not smart at all.

Well, Snotlout may not have been like Hiccup, but he could hold his



own, if only someone would give him a shot.

"Guys?" Hiccup said.

"Please," Astrid said. "You put the 'idiot' in 'idiot.'" He poked him hard in the chest. "That's right. The whole word."

"Guys..."

Snotlout crossed his arms. "I can't put the whole word into a word."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Of course you can."

"Guys!"

"What?" Astrid and Snotlout snapped together.

Hiccup ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, gods." He turned to his side. "Look, Astrid. Snotlout is smart, and he is a great asset to the village." He looked at Snotlout and smiled widely. "Like that one time..." He paused for a moment and his smile faltered. "Well, there have been plenty of times when he's been..." Hiccup bit his lip.

Snotlout leaned forward in anticipation.

Hiccup shrugged. "Well, you know."

"Hey!"

"And Snotlout," Hiccup said, ignoring his cousin's cry of protest, "Astrid is just being...Astrid."

Astrid grabbed Hiccup's arm and yanked on it hard so that he was facing her. "What does that mean?"

Hiccup looked up at the sky. "We should keep moving. We've not gotten nearly as far as I had hoped, and it's getting late." He started walking quickly along the cut path.

"Hiccup!" Astrid and Snotlout cried.

"Ok!" Hiccup threw his arms in the air and spun around. He gestured to Snotlout. "Remember when we were fighting the Red Death and you distracted it by hitting it in the eye?" He threw his arms out. "That was great! And you just came up with that on the spot!"

Snotlout glared at him with lidded eyes. "And that's the only thing you can think of from the last three years?"

"No!" Hiccup's eyes darted to the side and he pressed his lips together. "There have been other times..."

"When?"

Hiccup turned to Astrid. "And I just meant strong." He smiled. "Because you are, Astrid! You're strong."

She gave him a look of incredulity and disgust. "You didn't mean strong." She looked at Snotlout. "He didn't mean strong." She looked back at Hiccup and pointed at him. "You're avoiding.

"Yeah, Hiccup," Snotlout said. "Avoiding."

Hiccup stepped back and smiled nervously. "Hey! See? You two can agree on something!" He turned back around and took off at a half-jog. "Let's keep moving!"

"Hiccup!" the two of them shouted again before they hurried after him.

Astrid caught up to him first and started grilling him again, and Hiccup kept not-so-cleverly dodging her questions.

Well, Snotlout would admit that he was better than his cousin in one respect.

He did not turn and run from his problems.

\* \* \*

><p>Jehan pushed open the door to the kitchen and a hush fell over the room before the women began whispering and giggling again. He gripped the end of his sleeve in his hand and ran his wrist across his mouth quickly.<p>

The head cook walked up to him with a deep-set scowl. She was a rather thin woman, with a few wrinkles around her eyes and mouth and little wisps of grey under her veil and fillet. He had seen her laughing frequently with the other women and her husband, one of the many soldiers stationed in the abbey, so why she frowned so often at him was a great mystery.

Perhaps he had offended her in some way.

She folded her arms across her chest. "More wine?" she asked.

He nodded. "Please. And the Brother needs some mint as well, if you have it."

Her face softened slightly. "God help the poor Brother in his state." She looked him up and down and frowned again.

He smiled at her, but her scowl only grew more intense.

"I'll get you that bottle and some leaves. Don't you move from that spot." With that, she turned and stalked away.

Jehan obediently stayed where he was, though his eyes wandered over the room. It was filled with mostly women, though some had young children with them. The wives and daughters and children of some of the soldiers, of whom only a handful had followed the long-time tradition of bringing families to the war front. Some of the older men spoke of sending for their own families once the war had been won, to bring their own wives and children to help settle new towns and to add a strong Norman presence to the land rightfully belonging to His Grace, the Duke of Normanz and King of England.

He glanced to the side where two girls stood over low barrels of water and laundry, their camises pushed up to their elbows and the trailing sleeves of their bbliauts expertly pulled up to their shoulders and tied behind their necks so as to leave their arms completely free. He recognized them as the daughters of the Captain's second-in-command and smiled at them, and they quickly turned to each other and giggled and whispered behind their hands.

He looked away and wiped at his mouth again.

The head of the kitchen was nowhere in sight. He was starting to wonder how long he would have to stand in one spot when he felt something tug at his habit.

He glanced down and saw a little boy of about seven standing next to him and holding out a piece of bread. He smiled at the boy and took the food. "Thank you, little sire." He expected that the child would leave, but the boy merely shifted his feet.

"Do you know stories?" the boy asked suddenly.

Jehan blinked. "Yes, I know a few stories."

"My mum is too busy to tell me a story," the boy said. "Do you know any about brave soldiers? Like my dad?" He scrunched up his nose. "But not King David or Samson. I know those stories."

Jehan grinned. "Yes, I know some." He opened his mouth to start one, but the boy turned and ran off.

Children were utterly inexplicable.

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling and felt a tug at his habit again. He looked down and saw that the boy had returned, this time holding the hand of a smaller boy of about five with snot running down his chin. There were two girls of the same age standing behind them.

"He's going to tell a story," the older boy announced.

Oh, and now he had an audience. Jehan smiled widely. "So I am." He then slowly sat on the ground so that he was not towering above him when he spoke, but the children sat too and looked up at him with wide eyes. The younger boy came and sat down in his lap and wiped a hand over his nose and mouth and chin before sniffing and snorting very loudly.

Well, the Christ had said "let the little children come," and He had meant all of them, even the ones with runny noses.

Jehan handed the little boy the piece of bread, and he began to eat it while sniffing.

"Do any of you know the story of Shamgar?" Jehan asked.

The younger boy sniffled and the other three shook their heads.

He looked at the other three faces, all watching him intently. He had never been around children much. Once he had begun his training, he had been taken to live with the other postulantes and novices. The

younger boys were kept under the care tutelage of the other brothers. "Well, Shamgar was a great warrior and leader in Israel. Do you know where Israel is?"

"Yes," one of the girls said. "It's where Jesus lived."

"No, stupid," said the older boy. "He meant where." He then looked up and said confidently. "It's far away."

The little girl looked down at the floor with big wet eyes and Jehan held out a hand to her. She made her way over and her hands and knees and curled up against his side. "You're both right," Jehan said. "Israel is very far away, and it is where Jesus Christ lived." He wondered if it were perfectly normal for one's voice to get slow and soft when speaking to children.

The younger boy sniffled and swallowed the last of the bread.

"Shamgar was a great warrior who lived long before the Christ, though. And when he was alive, Israel was at war with the Philistines."

"I know about them," the older boy declared. "King David killed the big one when he was a boy."

"Yes," Jehan said. "But this was even before King David fought against them."

The younger boy leaned his head back against Jehan's chest.

"Shamgar's people had been fighting long and hard. And one day, Shamgar took up a stick and went to meet the Philistines in battle."

The girl not against his side scooted forward. The boy in his lap sniffled.

"And with that stick, he struck down six hundred of the enemy soldiers, and they all ran away. And with that stick, Shamgar saved Israel."

The older boy leaned forward. "It must have been a very large stick. The size of a tree."

Jehan shook his head. "No, it was a small stick."

"Then was it very sharp?"

"Not so sharp." Jehan smiled. "It was the sort of small stick farmers use to make their cows move."

The older boy crossed his hands over his chest. "He was very strong and brave, then. I want to be like him when I grow up."

The girl against Jehan's side looked up. "Can you come again tomorrow and tell us another story, Brother?"

"He most certainly will not," said the hard voice of the head

cook.

The girls jumped up and scampered off and the older boy pulled the younger one from Jehan's lap before running after them. Jehan slowly rose and dusted off his robes and looked at his feet. "I'm sorry. They asked for a story and Iâ€"

"Do you often work with children, Brother?" the woman asked.

He looked up and noticed that she was almost smiling, so he smiled back. "No, I have not been around children very often."

The woman scowled and thrust a bottle and a bunch of leaves into his hands. "On your way, then."

Jehan turned and quickly left the kitchen and the whispers and giggles behind him. Without waiting for the door to close behind him, he hurried down the halls and corridors to give Brother Martinus the wine and herbs.

He rounded a corner and bumped into something that roughly pushed him aside.

"Why in such a rush, monk?"

Jehan fought the urge to scowl when he heard Simon's voice. "Forgive me." He noticed a girl standing next to the soldier, a girl with dark, wavy hair that spilled over her shoulders. She wore a red hood, though it had fallen back so he could easily see that she had a beautiful face.

A red hood.

Dear God Almighty, how many girls of one profession did the village have?

"Pretty thing, isn't she?" Simon said as he pulled the girl in front of him. "Don't you think so, monk? You want a go at her?"

He must hold his tongue, he knew. He would not let this man get the better of him. He would not say more than he had to. "No," Jehan said simply, though he continued to watch her.

Her eyes were dark, almost black in the dimly lit corridor, but something flashed in them when he spoke and she raised one eyebrow.

She understood what he had said. She understood, and she was slightly insulted, though she hid it rather well.

"I wouldn't," Jehan added. "Though, she is pretty, I'll grant you that."

The girl smiled slightly.

Simon leaned forward. "Stupid little thing, too. Doesn't even speak our language."

Jehan raised an eyebrow and spoke against his better judgement. "Do you speak hers?"

Simon scoffed. "Of course not."

"She probably thinks you're the stupid one, then."

The girl's smile grew and she looked up into his eyes.

He did not know what she saw when she looked into his eyes, but whatever it was must have surprised her, for her own dark eyes grew incredibly wide before she blinked and cast her gaze downward again.

Simon smiled. "At least the girls here provide enough entertainment until we march against the Norsemen up North."

"The Captain is not expecting such orders from the King, last I heard."

Simon shook his head. "Oh, poor little monk. Why do you think we have weapons and men arriving soon? Why do you think we're trying to capture the dragons?" He leaned in and whispered, "What else is on this side of the sea, except for the Norsemen?"

Jehan looked at the girl, but she continued to avoid his gaze. If she understood what Simon had said, she gave no indication.

"And Norse women." Simon smiled. "There will even be enough left over for you."

Jehan bowed his head. "There's little honour in taking a girl outside the Lord's confines. And there is even less so in forcing her after you have destroyed her family and home."

The girl looked up at him then, though her face betrayed no emotion beyond apparent boredom.

Simon growled. "Go take your high and mighty attitude somewhere else, monk."

Jehan was only happy to do so. He nodded slowly and looked down once more at the girl, who refused to meet his gaze, before walking past them.

He wondered why the girl chose to remain silent when she clearly understood everything they had said.

Perhaps it was a matter of anonymity, a matter of being allowed in without fear of being turned away because she might actually uncover some sort of military secret. Perhaps that was what she wanted—to pass by without any sort of suspicion. Perhaps she was after secrets.

Perhaps she was a spy.

He laughed to himself and wondered when he had grown so suspicious. He had thought the Anglo-Saxon girl a witch, and he thought this one a spy...He was being utterly ridiculous.

The girl had her reasons for pretending to not understand, and that was that.

He supposed that if his eating relied on living in sin and pretending ignorance he would do the same.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup sighed and let his pack fall from his shoulder. His arms ached from rowing that morning, his feet ached from walking so long, and his back ached from carrying the weight of his supplies all day.<p>

"Oh, thank the gods," Snotlout said. "Are we stopping for the night?"

Hiccup nodded and rolled his shoulders back. "This looks like a good place." The clearing was wide enough for their bed rolls and a fire, and the ground was fairly flat. He looked up at the sky. "It's pretty late anyway." The sun would be down in a couple of hours, just a bit before midnight, and the sky would turn fantastic colours, though it would never go dark and the sun would only be gone for a few hours at most.

Snotlout hefted his pack and started walking.

"Where are you going?" Hiccup asked.

Snotlout stopped and shrugged. "Away from you two." He gestured with his thumb. "I'll just be over here, so wake me up when you want to start moving again."

Astrid shot Hiccup a glare and silently turned and picked a spot on the opposite side of the clearing from where Hiccup stood. She had been defiantly quiet for at least two hours, ever since Hiccup had failed to mention what exactly he had meant by "strong."

He had tried explaining in different terms what he had meant. Strong-willed, opinionated, intense, tough...All to no avail, and a few of his words of choice had served to only worsen the problem. The fact was, he could not explain what he had meant even to himself. Astrid was just Astrid, and that was all there was to it. He could not think of any way to describe it.

Snotlout smirked. "Good luck with her," he said before sauntering on his way.

Hiccup groaned and picked up his pack again. They would be traveling for two more days, and he wanted to clear the air before morning.

He walked up to her and smiled. She glanced up at him and huffed and turned back to her pack.

"Are you still not speaking to me?"

She untied her bed roll and shook it once before leaning forward and smoothing it on the forest floor.

"Ok, then." He dropped his own pack next to her and sat down. He opened the canvas flap and pulled out his own roll and a honey cake wrapped in waxed paper. He unwrapped the cake, broke it in half, and held out a piece to her. "Want some?"

Astrid looked at the cake for a few moments, and he could tell that she certainly did want some, but she turned away from him again.

Hiccup set her half of the cake on the waxed paper and placed it on the ground between them. "It's a nice night," he said. "Nice and cool." He bit into his cake and waited.

After a couple of minutes, Astrid picked up the cake and started eating slowly.

He smiled. "It's good flying weather." He finished his half of the honey cake and brushed the crumbs from his fingers. "Toothless is probably wishing I were home."

"It's too bright," she said crossly. "I won't be able to sleep."

He grinned widely.

"Stop that."

"Sorry," he said, though he continued to smile.

Astrid punched him lightly in the arm. "That's for earlier."

He leaned in and kissed her lightly. "That's for everything else?"

"Shut up." She brought up her hands to hold the sides of his face. "I can't kiss you if you're talking." She pulled him close and kissed him firmly.

The kiss tasted like honey and sent shivers up his spine and made his heart pound and his head heat up. He would spend the rest of his life kissing her, fighting with her, making up with her...

Something started to pinch at the back of his neck and in his shoulders. The rest of his natural life.

He pulled away quickly and stood up. "We should get a fire going."

Astrid furrowed her brow and looked as if she were about to ask a question, but she shook her head and smiled. "Alright."

He was glad of the distraction, and he spent the next few minutes gathering kindling in the form small twigs and dried leaves. He grabbed a few larger branches and met Astrid back at the bed rolls.

They piled the kindling close, but not too close, to their pallets, and he pulled a piece of steel and a piece of flint from his pack and struck them together. He blew gently on the sparks until they caught on the kindling, then he lit a few twigs in the small flames and let everything burn for a few moments before adding the first large branch.

"Hiccup?"



"Hm?" He sat back on his heels.

Astrid sat next to him and gazed at the orange light. "You said you've wanted to marry me for years. Since you were eight."

"Oh." He nodded. He had. He definitely had. He swallowed and threw the second branch onto the fire. "Yeah."

She was quiet for a long time, so long that he had added a third branch before she spoke. "I decided I was going to marry you when I thought you had died."

He looked at her. She had her knees pulled to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs. "That's...a funny time to make that sort of decision."

She shrugged and smiled. "Maybe."

He laughed. "Nothing 'maybe' about it. I was a corpse for all you knew."

Astrid did not laugh. She bowed her head and rested her forehead on her knees. "I was scared that I had lost you. Which was stupid, because I didn't even have you."

He stopped smiling and reached for her, but he pulled his hand back when she continued.

"I was scared," she confessed. "I was scared I'd never have the chance to say I was sorry. For...everything. For ignoring you. For being cruel"

Then he did put an arm around her. "You don't have to"

"For trying to kill Toothless."

He smiled. "Alright. I'll take that."

Astrid looked up and smiled back at him and leaned into his side. "I'm glad, though. Not that you almost died, but that we're getting married."

Hiccup's shoulders tensed. He tossed another branch onto the fire.

"I'm glad we have forever."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Forever was a very long time, he realized.

Astrid pulled away and looked at him warily.

He refused to meet her eyes.

Finally, she asked quietly, "Why did your dad send you on this trip?"

"We needed political advice," he said. He had told Snotlout. Snotlout had demanded all the reasons before he had agreed to come along, but

he had not yet told her everything.

"I know," she said. "But why?"

He threw two more branches onto the flames.

"What could possibly be so important that you need to seek the hofgoÃ°i? He hasn't been consulted like this since your dad's wedding."

Wedding. That was her reason for being there. He had almost forgotten. But it was not his reason. "It's a..." He pressed his lips together before opening his mouth again. "It's a war thing."

Astrid put a hand on his arm. "We're going to war?"

"Maybe," he said. "That's why we need the hofgoÃ°i." The fire light was starting to burn his eyes, so he looked at her.

Her brow was furrowed and her eyes narrowed. "You're not making much sense."

He looked down at his thumbs. "Well, there's this one country invading England right now. And their king..." He glanced at her and back at his hands. "He's heard all the legends about a... 'Dragon Tamer.'"

"That would be..." Her hand left his arm. "You."

He felt the sudden absence of her touch and reached out and grabbed her hand tightly. "Right. And he may or may not be sending some sort of envoy. And it may or may not be hostile." He smiled and shrugged, feigning a sort of courage he did not feel. "I mean, the Ruckuses have some sort of treaty with them, but Finna doesn't think they'll honour it. She thinks they might come to wipe us out and drag me off..."

Astrid clicked her tongue and pulled her hand from his. "And Finna knows best, doesn't she?"

"Hey, I told you there was never anything. Nothing." Why did she suddenly get so angry?

"I know," she said shortly.

He remembered just a few days before, when he had seen the girls talking and laughing and making fun of him. "I thought you two were getting along."

"I don't want to talk about her," she snapped.

"Alright." He sighed. She was incomprehensible. He would spend the rest of his life trying to figure out how Astrid's mind worked.

"So, some king wants to drag you off and make you tame his dragons," she said.

"Maybe."

Astrid frowned. "Where's he going to get dragons that far south?"

"I don't know." He did not particularly care, either. That was neither here nor there. "Right now we're just worried about whether there will be a war or not."

Astrid tucked her hair back behind her ear. "Well, it's nothing I'd worry about."

Hiccup nodded, but after all their years together he knew that she only tucked her hair like that when she was nervous. Or lying. Or trying to be brave for him.

"We're Vikings," she continued. "And whoever these men are will have nothing on us." She grinned. "Besides, Toothless and I won't let them have you."

He nodded. "Right."

"Hey." She brought her hand up and cupped his cheek. "I love you."

The words should have made him ecstatic. Instead, they reminded him that the rest of his life and forever were fast approaching. "I love you too."

She furrowed her brow. "Are you alright."

He pulled back and threw a few more branches onto the fire. "Fine." He brushed dirt from her hands. "Just tired." He stood and walked over to his bedroll and flopped down. "Let's go to sleep." He turned on his side so that he was facing away from her and squeezed his eyes shut.

About ten minutes later, she quietly said, "Hiccup?"

He did not answer, and he listened closely for the rustling that indicated she had lain down on her own pallet.

He doubted he would do very well at the being married thing.

He would never mention it to her. She would not understand. She would only worry.

Or what was worse: she would get angry. Or sad. Or...something.

And he would get over it soon enough.

**\*\*HISTORICAL NOTES!** Ok, so, I'm a Medieval Archaeologist/Medieval Anthropologist (the terms are almost interchangeable, but the second encompasses ethnography and linguistic work and the first falls under the second and mostly deals with the actual analysis and recovery of artifacts...oh, I'll get on with it), and my specialty is the Norse and European material culture. Like, household items, toys, food...All that good stuff. But my favourite area of material culture is clothing. It absolutely fascinates me, and I could go on and on about it for days, talking about the differences in certain kingdoms from century to century (don't ever ask me about Kentish fashion...I go a little crazy). As a consequence, I'm naturally going to include this in my work. So, terms that I used in this chapter (and a few I may use later and may have dropped earlier):\*\*

**\*\*Camise:** a woman's underdress, with long, tight sleeves. In Normandy, it was popular to have the sleeves extra long, so that they were about six to ten inches longer than the actual arm and would bunch up around the wrists. The skirt was long and ended around the ankles, though the peasant class and those who worked in fields often had shorter camises ending around mid-calf (showing the ankle was not a faux pas until much later). This was very similar to the Anglo-Saxon under dress.\*\*

**\*\*Serte:** The man's equivalent to the camise, though it was much shorter, ending around the hips.\*\*

**\*\*Bliaut:** An over garment. The women's garment was long, typically ending just below the knee in England (so that the underdress was visible), and at the ankle in most of France and Normandy. Sleeves were long in the 11th century, ending around the wrist. The sleeve in England flared slightly. In Normandy, the sleeves were very tight until about the elbow and then would flare dramatically and taper toward the floor (though not nearly as long and flared as they would become in the 12th century). A man's bliaut could be short- or long-sleeved. It was longer than the serte and ended around the knees. The man's bliaut is often mistakenly called a "tunic." The difference between the two is that the bliaut had separately cut sleeves that were sewn on, and the tunic was one woven garment and the whole T-shape was cut at once.\*\*

**\*\*Veil:** a single square of cloth worn by Norman women. It was fashionable in Normandy to let some hair show, but veils were worn on top of the head for modesty.\*\*

**\*\*Fillet:** a simple circlet, often of leather or hemp, worn around the head and brow to keep the veil in place. Fillets were also worn without a veil by unmarried women in most areas of Western and Northern Europe, with the exception of England (they just had to be different...). Astrid's headband is a fillet.\*\*

**\*\*Hood:** a garment that covered the head and hair and shoulders. Worn by both men and women, though Anglo-Saxon women wore them regularly. The hood was either sewn together at the front (mostly for men) or clasped at the throat (mostly for women). A red hood denoted prostitution in England and parts of France and Germany (I hope this puts a new spin on Little Red Riding Hood for you... :D). The hood was immensely popular with the church.\*\*

**\*\*Cloak:** a simple rectangle of cloth that was rather short, sometimes ending around the waist, and never ending further than the knees. There was no hood attached to the cloak. Men would fasten cloaks at the shoulder or at the breast with separate pins. Women would fasten cloaks at the breast. It could be worn over or under the shoulder-coverings of the hood.\*\*

**\*\*And a quick explanation of the difference between Sieur, Sire, and Seigneur, because I use them all in different places:\*\***

**\*\*Sieur:** A title reserved for knights. This became "sir" following the Norman Invasion when Middle English began developing.\*\*

**\*\*Sire:** The nominative singular form of Seigneur in some cases, but usually a term of respect that could be used for anyone. After the

establishment of feudalism in England (feudalism did not reach England until after the Norman Invasion), this term was applied only to lords.\*\*

\*\*Seignor: The Old French and Old Norman term that was applied to a lord before this term became seigneur in Middle French. The Middle French term eventually became archaic and gave way to "sieur."\*\*

\*\*I bet none of you had any idea you were signing up for a medieval anthropology course when you clicked on this story...\*\*

\*\*So, I went to the Subway on campus today, and I ordered my Veggie Delite because I'm a vegetarian and that's how I roll, and the guy in front of me turned around and glared at me as if I had just ordered a six-inch on Italian with skinned puppies and kitten bones and a splash of human baby blood. Can vegetables really offend a person that much?\*\*

\*\*I wrote this while listening to the playlist I finally made for this story (interestingly enough, most of the songs have nothing to do with this story; it's mostly 50's doo-wop and 1940's swing and boogie-woogie) and while sitting in my perfect little haven: Geeksboro in Greensboro, North Carolina. It might be the best coffee shop ever. Does this have anything to do with the comic book posters on the walls and the art tournaments and the Super Smash tournaments and the Mario Kart tournaments and the TARDIS in the corner and the screenings of The Walking Dead and Game of Thrones and Doctor Who? Possibly.\*\*

\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't. I'm not big on demanding them.\*\*

## 6. Chapter 6

\*\*Hooray for finally getting to write from Astrid's POV again. Hooray for a lot of things, not the least of which is my marvelous Beta, peacelight24, who gives me feedback scene by scene as I write and generally keeps me on track. Generally being the operative word. Sometimes we just get off-track together, and it's fine.\*\*

\*\*Honestly, this took a lot longer than it should have, because for some reason I would sit down to write and get three paragraphs in and realize that I had just written everything in French. So I would have to stop and go back and rewrite/translate everything...It was a problem.\*\*

\*\*Chapter 6: Peace\*\*

It had been a perfectly good waste of yet another night when she could have been sleeping.

Of course, walking in had been very much worth her time. There was a main gate, she knew, and it was heavily guarded and opened up into an area the men used as a training yard, but she supposed the monks who had lived there in previous centuries had used it for livestock. But there was another gate, the one she had come through, and it was manned only by a few sleepy sentries. That gate opened up near the kitchens.

There was more, of course. Quick observation had told her that there was one side of the main yard reserved as a stable. The stable had once been made of wood, most likely, when it had been housing horses. But what sort of horse needed a braced stone enclosure with a steel-coated door?

They already had a dragon, and it was a large one. And they were smart to keep it so close to where they stored all their weapons.

The distance from the kitchens to the rooms and dormitories the soldiers shared was unknown to her, however, as the idiot soldier had seen fit to take her through a different door. One further away. She would figure it out. The Christian priest had probably come from that direction. He had been holding herbs and a bottle.

But the soldier had said almost nothing of value, except what he had already told the Christian priest.

And he had not even been as good at it as she had been expecting, though he had lasted longer than she would have originally thought any Norman man could.

A perfectly good waste of an evening.

So, in all her disappointment, she smiled at him when he pressed two coins into her outstretched palm. She pretended that she did not take offense at the meager payment and quietly slipped out the door, though she would have preferred smacking him for wasting her precious time.

But once she left the small room, she glanced around her.

The previous night she had come from the left.

But no one would fault her for not remembering that.

So she turned right.

She knew of abbeys in the south that had been built with great care and that boasted elaborate decoration. But as she walked the stone corridor void of any carvings or embellishments, she knew the abbey had been built quickly and efficiently.

Or perhaps it was extremely old.

She walked past a few doors, all of which were spaced far enough apart to hint at dormitories. That Simon fellow must have been moderately important if he had his own room and bed.

There was a window just ahead where the corridor met another. A quick look would give her an idea of where she was and where else she might wander. But as she neared the window, someone rounded the corner.

The young Christian priest from the night before.

She bowed her head as she walked past him, missing the chance to look through the glass and ponder her situation. She could figure out her

location at the next window. There had to be others. Besides, she did not need to see him as she had gotten a good enough look when they first crossed paths.

Ymma had not been exaggerating when she said he was handsome. With his strong, smooth, and dark features, he could have easily made his way in the world on charm alone. Only a foolish piety could have driven him to the priesthood. And piety like that disturbed her. The truly pious had a tendency to be \_sincere\_, and that was a useless quality.

But what unnerved her more than that was the colour of his eyes. They were green, alarmingly green. A dark green, like leaves in summer, with hints of gold and brown. Not pure green, like Hiccup's eyes, but just as dark and just as bright.

She was about to turn when she heard him say, "\_S  o duru bist   one weg\_," The door is that way.

Well, she had not expected that he could speak the Anglo-Saxon tongue, albeit terribly and haltingly, as if he were searching for next word and terrified he would be wrong. He had a low voice, smooth and clear.

But there would be no finding the kitchen that day, which was perfectly fine.

She turned and smiled at him. "\_Ic   ancie     \_." A quick and polite thanks. Then she started walking back the way she had come, once again passing him by.

"I don't speak much more than that," he said in the Norman tongue and she stopped.

Of course he had noticed.

"I have a feeling you understand my language more than I understand yours."

She turned to face him again and noted that he was smiling kindly. His smile was perfectly straight. There was a sort of openness about him, as if he did not care that she had not acknowledged her understanding the night before. As if he only wanted to talk to her. A disturbing motivation. "\_Hw  t wilt       ?" What do you want?

He sighed. "Alright. I can try. But it's not going to be pretty." He took a deep breath and looked at her for a moment as if considering, then started, "\_Ic wilt\_..." He shook his head. "I don't even know enough to finish that. I just wanted to know why you pretended to not understand."

She returned his easy smile. "I didn't want to have to make conversation," she replied in his language. She had not wanted to speak to the soldier, and she did not want to speak to the priest either. She turned and kept walking.

"I met someone who spoke our language the other day." He said as he came up beside her. "You speak perfectly."

She glanced at him and picked up her pace. "Thank you." He was most

likely speaking of Ymma, who had no reason to learn Norman as Finna did. She had worked hard to learn the language. How fortunate that Kali and Kona had brought her a codex when they returned from their last foray into Norman territory.

"Do all Anglo-Saxons know our language?"

She stopped walking and faced him. "Only those of us who were wise enough to see you weren't leaving any time soon," she snapped.

He took a step back. "That's not my fault."

She turned to leave him.

"You don't have to sell yourself, you know," he said quietly.

She laughed and looked back at him again. "You don't even know me, and yet you're trying to save me. How sweet."

He furrowed his brow and pressed his lips together in a thin line.

Hiccup did that sometimes.

She shook her head.

"I mean, you're smart enough to know two languages. Really well."

She smiled. Two? She spoke four.

"You could become a secular canoness like Hrosvitha."

Finna covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. Then she started to truly laugh. The idea was ridiculous, and far more entertaining than it was insulting. Her? A canoness like that Germanic playwright? Her? Living a life of devotion to the Christian god? Her? Living a life of piety? She held her middle and pressed her hand against the cold stone wall to keep herself standing.

"Or not."

She straightened and shook her head and wiped at her eyes while she continued to giggle. She opened her mouth to respond, but a loud horn blew outside and they both jumped. "What's that?"

"Another company, I think."

Another? Why? She hurried back to the window and looked down into the yard. As he had suggested, another company of men, some mounted and some on foot, were marching through the gates with their flags high and swords and polearms shining. Just beyond the walls, she could see a range of siege weaponry, mangonels and towers of varying heights.

"They're the ones headed north for negotiations with the Norsemen," the priest added as he approached the window as well.

Negotiations. Of course. She always ensured that she had a healthy army and an incredible amount of weapons when forming treaties and



alliances. "Do negotiations usually require so many catapults?"

The priest leaned over her shoulder and she moved away slightly. He truly was handsome, the sort of handsome that belied innocence and grace, the way she had always figured the Ljǫsálfar looked.

He bit his lip and furrowed his brow. "No." Then he looked at her quizzically. After a moment, he said, "You should go. It will look suspicious if you hang around much longer."

She nodded and stepped back. But before she turned to go, she asked, "Why didn't you say anything?"

He looked at her for an uncomfortable length of time before he finally replied, "I don't know."

She frowned.

He smiled and shrugged. "Is that the wrong answer?"

She shook her head. "It's the best answer." It was the only answer she would have believed. She smiled and decided to take a small chance. "I was actually planning to leave by way of the kitchens. It's closer to home. I won't have to walk around the abbey."

He cocked his head to the side. "That door opens west. You'll be wanting to head east..."

Damn. He knew something of geography.

His eyes widened. "You're not Anglo-Saxon, are you?"

"I need to go," she said. She had given far too much away.

He caught her wrist in his hand. "Are you one of the Norsemen? One of the ones who live on the islands?"

She shook her hand free. "How do I leave?" She knew she should consider sleeping before her next adventure into enemy territory. She was far more alert when rested.

He pointed to the corridor left of the window. "Keep walking the way you were going first. Take a right and at the end of that hall is a set of stairs. Once you're down, it's the first door to your left. The double doors lead to the kitchens, but the one on the left opens right next to the gate."

She clenched her hands into fists. Why was he helping her? Maybe it was a trap, one sure to get her captured. But he had figured out who she was, and he must have realized that she would not fall for something so simple. Or perhaps he had been counting on that...

"The guards won't question it," he continued. "They're more concerned with keeping people from coming in."

She did not trust him, not one bit. So she would do exactly as he said. She walked the direction he was pointing.

"Wait!" He grabbed her hand. "Do you know the Dragon Tamer?"

Did she know Hiccup? Finna looked at the priest.

"I won't say," he said with all the excitement of a young boy wanting a good story about a hero. "But have you ever met him? Is he all the legends say his is?"

Ten feet tall and with the strength of twelve men? She shook her head. "I've never seen him in my life."

"Do you have a name?"

"Of course I have a name." She tugged at her hand, but he held it fast. If she was about to be led to prison by a Christian \_monk\_...

"What is it?" He smiled brightly. "I'm Jehan."

She did not care if he were Thor himself. She wanted him to let go. "I should leave," she said as she pulled her hand again. "As you said, it will look suspicious if I linger any longer."

He laughed. "You're a Norsewoman pretending to be an Anglo-Saxon pretending to not understand our language. You're already suspicious." Then he did release her.

She held her hand to her chest and nodded once. "Thank you, Jehan." She turned and quickly left him following his directions and refusing to slow or think until she was safe outside the walls.

Perhaps she had been wrong. Perhaps the monk was worth noticing. He was smart. He noticed things. He might yet prove to be of service.

Not that she would ever dare recruit him, though he might come in useful in other ways. He had seemed a very honest and open sort. It was unfortunate; had she noted a speck of dishonesty in him, she might have been able to trust him. But deceit was her trade, betrayal her wares. She would have nothing but the best.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid pushed open the door to the <em>hofgoÃ°i<em>'s hut behind the temple and wiped her cheek.

She, for one, thought it incredibly stupid that the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ had seen fit to sprinkle all of them with blood before seeing them in turn. It was not as if they were sacrificing, or praying, or asking favours or anything.

The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ himself sat on a stool just behind a dying fire. There was a table to the side of the door where several baubles of rounded, coloured glass and various stone design sat.

Astrid glanced at another stool, closer to where she stood. "So what am I supposed to do? Just sit down?" she asked as she tried to mask the nervousness in her voice.

The \_hofgoÃ°i\_'s teeth flashed a strong yellow in the firelight and Astrid cringed. "If you like," he replied in a low rasp.

She sat down on the stool.

"You have traveled long to be here."

Yes, she certainly had. It had been a long journey, made longer by Snotlout's existence. She was about to answer when something occurred to her: everyone traveled far to get to the temple. "That's not a very impressive conclusion," she pointed out. The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ did not choose to build his \_hof\_ in an ideal location. Temples should honestly be constructed closer to actual civilization. Within civilization would be preferable, but she supposed the priests needed the solitude.

Then she covered her mouth with her hand. Could he throw her out for that? Make a pact with the gods to change her destiny? "I'm sorry. I meant no disreâ€" "

"Let me see your eyes," the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ said.

She obediently leaned a bit forward and noted the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ wore a black hood. She could not fathom why. He had shown his face, deeply lined with age, when he had spattered them with blood.

She still did not appreciate that bit.

"A Hofferson," he said.

She sat back, slightly surprised. "You've met my parents?" She had never known of their venturing beyond Berk except to go on raids, but it made sense that they would have at some point in their lives.

"No," he said simply. "Give my condolences to your brother."

She had four of those. "Which one?" Then another thought struck her. "Why?" Had something happened while she had been traveling? Had they not told her of something important?

"Ask me your question."

Astrid wanted to ask what he had meant by his previous remark, but he had avoided answering the first time, and she felt that he would do so again. It seemed his business to be cryptic and mysterious. "Well, it's about..." Oh, how to phrase it. The very word was still foreign and filled with giddiness and nerves. "My future."

The \_hofgoÃ°i\_'s yellow teeth flashed in a grim smile again. "Few who come ask after the past and present." He nodded. "You're here because you plan to get married."

Astrid did not like the way he said that. Not his tone, not his choice of words. She shifted a bit. "No, I'm here because I'm getting married. It's certain."

"Many things we believe to be certain are far from being so," he said in a low tone.

She crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. "Well, this \_is\_."

"Come closer," he instructed, and she leaned forward again. "Ah, yes. Four months from now, yes?"

She flipped her fringe back with a toss of her head. "Naturally." Any idiot knew that the only time to get married was immediately after harvest. All one had to do to predict a marriage was look at the season changes.

He was hardly enlightened.

The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ was silent for a long time before he finally said, "You cannot marry in four months."

Astrid sat up straight. "What does that mean? I will not? I must not?"

"You cannot."

She scowled. "Well, that's unfortunate. Because I'm going to." He was wrong. He had been wrong before.

"The gods have willed otherwise."

"\_I\_ have willed that I \_shall\_," she said sharply. "And damn the gods." She knew the gods had more power in temples. It was the reason people visited \_hofs\_ in the first place. She knew they could strike her for such a remark in a sacred place.

But she did not care. She was going to marry him whether the gods liked it or not.

Besides, the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ had been wrong before.

And he was wrong again.

"Then death and devastation shall separate you."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "But only if I marry him?" She shrugged. She would take her chances.

"No," the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ said. "You cannot marry in four months. Then death and devastation shall separate you."

She nodded. There was not a choice. "Well, death and devastation have never met \_me\_ before." She smiled. "Death and devastation will run when they do." He had been wrong before.

The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ looked at her, but she could not read his expression. All she could see was the glow of the dying fire dancing in his eyes.

She shivered slightly, only from the slight chill in the air, and squared her shoulders.

The will of the gods was absolute, but \_hofgoÃ°i\_ had been wrong before.

"I see a man of power in your future," he finally said.

"Strange," she replied. "So do I. His name is Hiccup." Hiccup would

be the chief, and people already looked to him as a leader. He might not have realized it, and it might not have been consistent as people still deferred to his father, but it was true. She could have easily predicted a man of power in her future.

She had predicted it.

She had predicted it years ago.

"And so much death..."

He had been wrong before. "Do you say the same nonsense to everyone?" she asked, trying to hide the tightening in her voice.

He spread his hands before her. "I only interpret the will of the gods."

"Well, you're not very good at it." Then she said, more for her own benefit than that of anyone else, "Everyone knows you've been wrong before. You told Stoick he would have many sons." She leaned across the fire. "He has one."

The priest smiled. "Would he not gain from your family?"

She laughed sharply and pointed a finger at him. "But I can't marry Hiccup, crazy old man!"

The hofgoÃ°i sighed dramatically. "The will of the gods is complicated but resolute."

She shook her head and smiled in triumph. "You're covering. I've found the loophole in all you've said, and you're covering!"

"Your determination will serve you well," he said with an approving nod.

She frowned. "What?"

"You will enjoy the king's ransom."

Whatever that was supposed to mean. "Is this before or after the death and devastation?"

"I see pain and anger in your future."

Again with the pain and destruction. Did he not have a different story he could tell? "Oh, the anger isn't in the future, believe me." She stood up and knocked the stool over as she did. "This is ridiculous. I'm marrying Hiccup, and what's more, I'm going to be happy." She would be happy. Because he was wrong. And she did not have to sit there and listen to him be wrong. "Not dead. Not devastated." She folded her arms across her chest and nodded once. "So there."

The hofgoÃ°i shook his head, and when he next spoke, his voice held a low tremor of sadness. "But you cannot, child."

She uncrossed her arms and let her hands clench into fists at her side. "You're wrong," she hissed. Then she turned around and marched toward the exit. As she yanked open the door and the light of day

spilled into the darkened room, she blinked and took a step back and knocked into the table. One of the baubles fell and rolled across the packed floor and came to rest at the \_hofgoÃ°i\_'s feet.

He picked up the bauble and studied it a moment before saying, "You will fear it. You will fear that it will not happen. And it cannot."

She shook her head. "I fear nothing." Then she stalked out of the hut and let the door slam closed behind her.

Damn the gods, and damn the \_hofgoÃ°i\_, and damn whatever plans they had.

Her plan was to live, and her plan was to marry Hiccup. She would move he earth for that. She would fight through armies of Æsir and Vanir and mortal men for that.

She marched up to Snotlout, who was sitting on a log and whittling a small stick into a smaller stick. "It's your turn."

He stood up and stretched. "You look happy. Did he tell you some other girl is going to ruin your wedding?"

She ground her teeth. "No."

Snotlout smirked before sauntering toward the hut.

No, the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ would never be so explicit. He had merely told her things she either found ridiculous or thing she could have predicted herself.

That's all the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ really was, she realized. Just a man who said cryptic remarks that one could interpret one way or another; just a trickster who told people what they already knew. He could not make a true prediction.

She swallowed hard.

But what if he could?

No one in their right mindâ€"except for Hiccup, of course, but he was the exception that proved the ruleâ€"doubted the words of the man chosen to interpret the will of the gods.

"He's been wrong before," she told herself. "He's wrong again."

She looked around and could not see Hiccup. He was probably in the actual \_hof\_, doing whatever chief's sons had to do when they visited templesâ€"praying for the village name by name, or something like that. She had no desire to find him in there, so she marched toward her pack with the purpose of finding something to eat.

\* \* \*

><p>Finna pushed open the door and dragged herself into her house. She glanced around and smiled slightly when she saw no one around, but her smile quickly fell.<p>

Smiling took too much effort.

She pulled the red hood roughly from her head and opened her mouth in a wide, loud yawn as she trudged toward the back of the house where she slept.

"You're back," Rust's voice called from her room.

Finna sighed and pushed open her door. He was stretched out on her bed, his arms behind his head and a wide grin plastered on his face. She jerked her thumb upward. "I'm exhausted."

He obediently rose from the bed. "I can see that. You look horrible. Particularly around the eyes."

She scowled at him. "I was up all night." And the night before that. In fact, she had not slept since leaving Berk.

"Doing what?"

She flopped down onto her bed and stared at the ceiling. "Working." She closed her eyes. She needed sleep so desperately...

"You were gone."

"I was working," she repeated as she draped the hood over her eyes. "I was with Ymma." He'd believe that.

"Really?" he asked with an innocent lilt that clearly said he did not believe her at all. "How odd. She was just here looking for you."

"Damn," Finna said carelessly.

"She had something for you."

Finna pulled the hood away and cracked open an eye and saw that he was holding a small clay bottle. She sat up quickly and held out her hand. "Give it here." He did so, and she unstopped the bottle and sniffed it.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Pennyroyal, I think." Finna pressed her finger against the top of the bottle and shook it lightly. She took her finger away and tasted it. "Maybe some tansy."

Rust's eyes narrowed.

Apparently he knew his herbs far better than she gave him credit for. Not that slipping up around him particularly mattered.

"Why do you need..." He seemed to notice the red in her hand. His jaw twitched slightly when he asked, "New hood?"

Finna smiled. "I borrowed it."

His whole person tensed. "Where have you been?"

She held out the hood to him. "Could you hang this by the door?" When he did not move, she rolled her eyes. "Fine. I can do it." She stood

up and brushed past him and hung the hood on a little hook. She turned back around and smiled. "There. Easy, see?"

Rust whipped around and grabbed her shoulders and pressed her against the wall. "What have you done?"

"I assume you're not talking about how I just hung up the hood," she said calmly as she refused to look at his face. If she looked at his eyes, she might break. He could always see .

He took his hands from her shoulders and brought them up to his head. "Gods, Finna!"

She sighed. "You know, I find it so interesting that you can be with whichever woman pleases you..." She tapped her chin. "I suppose there is a catch in there for you, though. But the point is that I, however, must remain a virgin until you take that from me." She grinned and looked at his face, though not his eyes. "Which, if I recall, you already did. Two years ago."

He turned pale. "That wasn't..." He pointed an accusing finger at her. "You know what that was about!"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, I remember. You wanted to see if you could be with a woman. What a discovery we made!"

He folded his arms. "You won't distract me from this."

She looked behind him to her warm, inviting bed and stifled a yawn. "I don't really see why you're upset. Unless..." She looked up at him and grinned widely. "Have you fallen for me, Rust? Have you changed your preferences?" She shook her head as he pressed his hand against his mouth and turned away from her. "Honestly, I'm a bit disappointed that you'd abandon yourself so easily. You've always been one toâ€"

"For once in your life!" he shouted as he wheeled back around to face her. "For once in your life, take something seriously!"

She pressed herself against the wall for a moment. Then she smiled. "I take things seriously." She held up her hand and ticked off a finger. "I take wars seriouslyâ€"

"What about yourself?" Rust demanded. He grabbed her shoulders again and shook her. "Could you at least pretend for my sake?"

She cocked her head to the side and smiled, but she still refused to look directly into his eyes. "Oh, Rust! You do care..."

He pushed away from her. "Damn it, Finna! You could be killed for this!" he cried with a slight break in his voice.

"A ridiculous punishment for having a bit of fun on the sly." Honestly, she was starting to feel a bit like a child being scolded. And she was far too tired to be scolded.

"Fun?" He laughed harshly. "Fun? If you were just having fun, this would not be a problem!" He threw out his arms. "You're having 'fun' with one of the Normans! That's..." He raked his hands through his long hair. "That's almost treason!"



She held up a finger. "Almost." Finna put her hands on her hips. "I've never seen you like this. Are you sure you haven't fallen in love with me?" She grinned and wagged a finger at him. "Oh, you can say you prefer men all you like, but you can't hide the truth from meâ€œ"

"You know that if that were the case, we'd be having a very different conversation right now." He leaned in close. "I am concerned for your \_life\_."

She shrugged and pushed past him. "They can't kill me. Who will take over the tribe?"

"You have cousins."

"Oh, Rust." She sat down on her bed and crossed her legs. The blankets were so warm and so tempting... "I may know, and you may know. But there is something else that we both know, and that fact is that no one else will know." She smiled.

Rust took his time before quietly asking, "Are you blackmailing me?"

Then she did look into his eyes. His beautiful, dark eyes, darker than her own and filled with so much sadness and hurt and concern. For her.

Damn him.

She rose to her feet and held his face gently between her hands. He had secrets just as she did. Secrets no one could ever know, not even his own sister. And she would protect those secrets because she needed him on a deeper and far more personal level than any strategy she could concoct. She could not afford to sever the bond they shared. "Have I ever?" She trusted no one completely, no one save him.

He bowed his head and rested his forehead against hers. "No. You haven't." Then he pulled her tight against his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

As she wound her own arms around his neck, she suddenly realized just how tired she truly was. She rested her chin on his shoulder and closed her eyes. She could have gone to sleep right there.

He leaned his cheek against the side of her head. "Just...don't scare me. Don't do anything like this. Ever again."

She nodded slowly. She would agree, as she always did. But they both knew she would fuck every man from the Hebrides to Constantinople if it meant getting whatever she wanted.

"And I'll lie for you. Of course I will."

She nodded again. "I know." She pulled back and grinned up at him. "Because you're secretly in love with me."

He dropped his arms from around her and rolled his eyes. "Gods above..."

She walked back to her bed and started unlacing her boots. "But I did learn quite a bit. Layout aside, I've got quite a bit about a..." She finally let herself yawn wide. "A potential plan. And their captain..." She yawned again. "Their captain. He'sâ€œ"

"Go to sleep," Rust said. "You can tell me later."

She kicked her boots off and lay down. "And if I forget to tell you?"

He sat down next to her on the edge of the bed. "I'll be here when you wake up."

She smiled. "Ever the loyal watchdog."

"Ha," he said dryly.

She yawned again and closed her eyes. "I was right," she mumbled. "They're not going to let us be. Maybe us," she amended, "but not them. The..." She yawned. Gods, she was tired. "The Hooligans."

He patted her leg. "Sleep." Then he planted a kiss on her forehead.

She winced. "You need to shave."

"I rather like it," he said.

"Hm." She rolled over. "Wake me in a few hours? I want to get some things done before dark."

"Of course."

She breathed deeply. She knew he would not wake her until the next morning if he could help it. And she knew he would stay the whole night, as he had said.

And she was glad she knew those things.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup dropped the flint and steel back into his pack and added a couple of logs to the burning kindling. He sat back on his heels and watched the flames for a moment, just to make sure they did not die in the wind, before rising to his feet and shaking out his bedroll.<p>

Snotlout, of course, had gone off on his own to find a place to sleep, so only Hiccup and Astrid shared the fire that night. Under normal circumstances, that would not have been a problem, but that night seemed to be a repeat of the previous one, as Astrid had not said a single word since they had left the \_hof\_, and Hiccup could only wonder what he had done.

But he knew from experience that she would continue ignoring him and being angry until he attempted to smooth things over, so he stood up and walked to where she was sitting on her own roll and unbraiding her hair. Her hair was beautiful, long and yellow and always slightly crimped from her braid, and she had masses of it.

She glanced up at him and then back at her lap. He simply watched her for a moment as her fingers worked and untied the fillet at her brow.

"Are we back to not speaking again?" he asked.

She started and looked up at him. "No!" She smiled. "Why would you think that?"

He furrowed his brow and pressed his lips together. "Well, you've been...quiet."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. Sorry." She laughed quietly. "I wasn't trying...Just thinking." She scooted to the side and he sat next to her. "It's just strange, you know? Having someone interpret your destiny."

Hiccup nodded and leaned back on his hands.

She laughed. "The \_hofgoÃ°i\_ apparently told Snotlout he'd be married within the year."

He shrugged. "It could happen."

Astrid gave him a lidded look.

"Maybe?"

Her face did not change.

He threw his hands up. "I'm being positive!"

She rolled her eyes and turned her gaze to the fire. "Positivity. Right."

He watched the firelight and the dim orange of the late day sun dance across her features, turning everything about her to gold. Gods, she was beautiful. But even as he considered her, a painful tingle started at the base of his neck and he looked down at his hands.

"What did he say?" she asked.

Hiccup looked at her again. Snotlout? He had said quite a bit. He usually did.

"About the war," she continued as she met his eyes.

"Oh." Not Snotlout. "He said he foresaw peace."

It was amazing how close he could be to her and still feel so far away. He grabbed her hand and she laced her fingers through his. She was always so easy with everything. Why could he not be like that?

"So you should sharpen up on your swordsmanship," she said.

"Whaâ€" He furrowed his brow. "That's not what peace means."

Astrid tossed her fringe. "I'm not sure how much stock I put by him. Besides, you're the one who always says..." She added a dramatic amount of nasality to her voice and said, "'Well, the \_hofgoÃ°i\_ is wrongâ€"'"

"I don't say that!" he said. He pulled his hand from hers and poked her cheek. "And even if I did, I wouldn't sound that way."

Astrid shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said dryly. "That was a spot-on impression. You're crazy."

He rolled his eyes. "I say he's been wrong before."

She nodded. "Right," she said, her voice tight and almost accusing. "And you're believing him now because you want to."

"What's wrong with that?"

She shrugged and looked back at the fire. "Nothing."

Her eyes in the firelight were so wonderfully blue, like ice in midwinter. He had to wonder, what colour of eyes would their children have? Blue or green?

Children. Oh, gods.

He looked at the fire quickly. "Are you nervous?"

Astrid pulled her knees to her chest and was quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "Yeah. Are you?"

"Yes!" He let out a huge breath he had not realized he had been holding. Just admitting to it was such a wonderful release. "I'm so...I just don't feel ready, you know?"

She nodded and smiled. "Yeah."

They grinned at each other, and for the first time in days, Hiccup felt as if they were completely on the same page. They would be fine.

So laid down on her mat and pulled her down next to him. He could relax, and he might have gone to sleep right there had she not said, "Do you want kids?"

Children. A very important part of any Viking marriage. "Well, we don't have much of a choice." Then he winced. "That came out wrong. I meant that...Well, yes, but..."

She nodded against his chest. "I know."

He took a deep breath and let it out and hugged her tighter. He would think more about that when it became an actual issue. For the moment, he just wanted to enjoy being there, with her, with almost no one else around.

"We'd have to have a son, of course. That goes without saying."

Oh. She had given this a lot more thought than he had. "Right." But it made sense. In Hooligan tradition, only a boy could take over the

tribe. It was different in the south, where the Boggs and the Ruckuses lived, but the northern tribes stuck closer to tradition. He had even heard that the Vikings in Iceland only let men train as warriors.

"And a girl. Two girls."

She really had thought about it. She always planned more than he ever did. He had not even considered...

"I always wanted a sister," she continued. "I can't imagine living without a big family, you know?"

"Not really." He had never had siblings. He had no idea what having a large family would have been like. After his mom...Well, as far back as he could remember, it had only been him and his dad, which meant that he had been alone for most of his life.

"What did he tell you about it?" she asked quietly.

He brought one arm underneath his head and tried to sound casual. "Same things he told you, I imagine. Happy marriage, full household, a son, all that."

She sat up and turned away from him. "Yeah, the same things."

He sat up as well and reached for her shoulder. "Astrid..."

"I'm exhausted," she said quickly. "It's been a weird day."

He rose so that he was kneeling next to her. "Hey..." When she looked at him he smiled and took one of her hands in both of his. "I love you. You know that, right?"

She gave him a small smile. "I know."

"And you can tell me if anything's wrong." Fine words coming from him, since he had only just voiced his own concerns to her.

"Nothing's wrong. It's all perfectly right." She smiled wide and brushed her fringe back with her free hand, an old nervous habit.

And he knew something was wrong, that it was not perfectly right. But he also knew that Astrid would never tell him anything if he pressed too hard. She would only say so when she was ready. So he smiled, and said, "Alright."

Then he stood up and walked back to his own pallet and laid down. He looked at her, but she had already stretched out on her side so that she faced away from him, so he rolled onto his back and stared at the soft, glowing colours of the summer night sky.

They had not kept anything from the other in years. Of course, he had kept all his conversations with his dad quiet, because she was not supposed to know those. But then he had kept his own apprehensions from her, and he still kept the depth of his fears hidden. And he knew she was keeping something important from him, something he should know. He felt the lies and the secrets pushing and piling like

a wall, and he could not help feeling that it was a wall that would not fall down easily.

But at least he did not need to worry about a war as well as his bride to be.

\* \* \*

><p>Jehan stared down at the pages of the epistle and attempted to study.<p>

Studying and more studying. That was his role in the church: to study the words of the scriptures until his time came to teach the words and their meanings to others younger than he.

Any other day he might have been able to focus his mind on the task before him. Greek was typically harder than Latin for him, for Latin at least looked and sounded familiar. It was spoken in the abbey. It was the foundation of the Norman language. He normally had to concentrate when reading Greek.

But on that particular night, the letters only swam before his eyes, words mixing into a jumbled mess as his mind continued to travel back to the Norsewoman with the dark eyes.

Of course he had considered the fact that she had come to the abbey with motives other than those she presented. He would have been foolish to not entertain that thought.

But he could not reason the why, as the treaty between the Vikings and the company had been upheld for almost a year. And he could not fathom who had decided to send the girl in.

What sort of leader forced one of his own to prostitute herself for the sake of information?

But try as he might, he could not banish her words from his memory. "\_Do negotiations usually require so many catapults\_?" The more he thought about the situation, the more he began to feel sick and uneasy. But the Captain was adamant that treaties, rather than war, be made.

Brother Martinus groaned and rolled over on his bed, and Jehan bit his lip.

The stomach sickness had only worsened over the past days, and dramatically. The surgeon had finally spared the brothers some time that morning and after carefully considering the fever and the swelling in Brother Martinus' abdomen and the vomiting, he had declared the malady a result of excessive blood in the liver and had bled the older brother from his groin and ankles.

The bloodletting had not brought about much improvement, however, and Jehan wondered if he should go find the surgeon to seek either a second treatment or another option.

He had just about made up his mind to abandon his perusal of the scriptures in favour of the search for the surgeon when a knock sounded at the door. After a moment, he heard the knock again and finally halted his study to rise and open the door.

A soldier stood in the doorway. He was one Jehan had not seen before. "The Brother's presence is requested in the yard."

Jehan looked at Brother Martinus, who still lay on his side, and back at the soldier. "I'm afraid he's not well."

The soldier looked at Jehan seemingly for the first time. "You'll have to come then." He turned and started walking.

Jehan knew that accent. It had been years since he had heard it, however. As he hurried after the soldier, he asked, "Are you from Rouen?"

The soldier looked at him with both eyebrows raised. "You've been to Rouen?" He smiled.

"I'm from Rouen," Jehan said.

The soldier frowned. "Captain Gervaise said you both were from Caen. The abbey near the palace."

Captain Gervaise was not their captain, and Jehan had to wonder how the new company head knew so much about the two brothers. "I am," Jehan explained. "I was born in Rouen. Half our order moved from Rouen when His Grace established the abbey at Caen."

"From Rouen to Caen." The soldier shook his head. "That's a long way to go."

"Almost three days in large company," Jehan agreed.

After that, the soldier seemed to have nothing more to say to Jehan, so the two young men walked in silence until Jehan asked, "Why were you sent to fetch one of us?"

"I don't know," the soldier said, but the way he said it, quickly and forcefully, told Jehan that he did know and was not allowed to disclose.

So Jehan bit his tongue and held in his curiosity until after the soldier had pushed open the large doors that had led to the yard. When he had stepped into the yard, Jehan froze as he saw the Captain and another older man he could only assume was Gervaise in heated discussion and surrounded by several hundred men.

"You will not take half my men north!" the Captain shouted. "I have been in contact with His Grace andâ€"

"I have been in contact with His Grace as well," Gervaise replied with all the calm of a man who thought he had already won an argument. "And he seems to have changed his mind." The man then turned his straight nose and sharp eyes on the soldiers surrounding the two captains. "The Vikings, while they would be excellent allies, may prove to be our most formidable foes!"

A loud shout rang from about half the men present.

"What is to be done if they throw their support to the English lords out of fear of the King?"

The shouts of support grew louder.

Jehan furrowed his brow and pressed his lips together. He wanted to run. He was not made for war.

And were the Normans not descended from Viking conquerors? How could they justify killing their own? Then again, the Normans were also descended from the Franks, as were the Anglo-Saxons. Reason and loyalty was dead in time of war, when brother and cousin turned one against the other.

Gervaise seemed to notice Jehan and the soldier. "Ah, Sieur Armine. Thank you for bringing him." He pulled his sword from its sheath and shouted, "The King has declared that I am to lead this company from now on!" He looked at the Captain. "He has declared that you are to step down."

"This is madness!" the Captain cried.

"This is war," Gervaise clarified before leveling his blade at the Captain and driving it forward, through the red tabard and the steel mail and out of the Captain's back, the steel tip dripping red onto the cobblestones. Almost as quickly as he had thrust, Gervaise pulled his sword back and the former Captain crumpled to the ground. "You, Boy," Gervaise said with a nod in Jehan's direction. "Give him his rites." Then he handed off his sword to another man who began wiping the blood off with his own tabard.

Jehan inhaled sharply and found that he could not move, so Armine pushed him forward. As he stumbled toward the dying Captain, he could only wonder if the man might not have been killed if he had not come. For that had clearly been his purpose, to give the Captain his last rites before meeting with God.

But he had only heard the sacraments once, and he had been very young. And he had not yet taken his permanent vows. Could he even administer the rites?

And there was no water, no other priest to carry the cross—there was not even a cross to carry.

His legs trembled as he approached the Captain, and he knelt beside him as the other man clutched desperately at his cloak.

"God's...God's peace be in this place," Jehan said quietly, "And in all who are here." The terrible irony of the words were not lost on him

"Now, we outnumber them," Gervaise shouted to the crowd of silent men as if nothing had happened.

Jehan had no water, so he used his thumb to sign the cross on the Captain's forehead. "Purify me with hyssop, Lord, and I shall be made clean..." Was that part necessary? Was the end more important? He did not know...He would have to skip that part. "Have you anything to confess?"

"And we are greater in arms than they are at this time," Gervaise



continued to some cheers.

The Captain pulled at Jehan's robes. The older man opened his mouth as if to say something, but he coughed, and a slight trickle of blood started at the corner of his mouth.

"May Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you your sins, and lead you to everlasting life."

"But what if they band together?"

"May the Almighty and Merciful Lord grant you pardon, absolution, and remission of your sins..." Was that the end?

"The King has decreed that we set forth to rid ourselves of this threat."

It had to be the end. "Amen."

"And you have seen what happens to those who refuse the decrees of the King."

Jehan closed his eyes tight. "Our help is in the name of the Lord..."

"I will take half my men, and half of you already stationed here."

"Save your servant who trusts in you..." The Lord's Prayer had to be recited. Had he already passed it? He had already passed it.

"We will depart for the North in the morning."

"I impart to you a plenary indulgence and the remission of all your sins..." Jehan swallowed.

"There we will build our ships, and we will construct our weapons."

"And I bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son..."

"Sieur Armine shall be in charge in my stead while I am gone."

"And of the Holy Spirit..." Jehan looked down at the former Captain's white, impassive face. "Amen."

"His orders are my orders. And in four months, half of the remaining shall meet us in the north!"

The soldiers cheered.

He was dead. Jehan could not remember how the prayers for the departed began, so he squeezed his eyes shut and said, "Lord, grant him eternal rest, and let perpetual light shine upon him."

"And we will take the Norsemen!" Gervaise cried to loud accord.

"Deliver his soul, O Lord."

"We will find the Dragon Tamer and bring him here in chains if we must!"

The cheering grew.

"May he rest in peace."

"We will take their dragons and their people!"

"To you, O Lord, I commend the soul of your servant..."

"For the glory of Willame and Normanz!"

The shouting was almost deafening and Jehan could hardly hear himself say the next words.

"That he who has departed this life may evermore live for you." They followed a man, a mere mortal man, willing to do as he said and decided on his whims because he had crowned himself a king. "In your all merciful and loving forgiveness, blot out the sins which he has committed through human weakness; through Christ our Lord."

Gervaise knelt next to him and asked as the men cried out their support for the Bastard King, "Is it done?"

Jehan resisted the urge to pull away. "Yes."

"Good." The new leader straightened. "You may go."

Jehan quickly rose to his feet and ran back into the abbey. As he raced up the steps and down the halls, he had only one thought in his mind. He had Brother Martinus had to leave. He did not know how, but they could not be part of something that threatened the lives of an entire people. He burst through the door and called over the sounds of shouting and polearms striking the ground, "Brother Martinus! Get up!"

The other monk did not move on his bed, so Jehan crossed to him and shook his shoulder. "We have to go. We can't stay!" He shook the man so hard that the brother rolled onto his back, his eyes open and staring blankly at the ceiling.

Jehan suddenly remembered how the prayer of the deceased began.

"Come in haste to assist him, you saints of God!" He pressed his hands to his mouth and stumbled backward. His head and back hit the stone wall behind him hard, and he sank to the ground and felt his insides turn as cold as the stones beneath him.

One man, concerned only with bringing honour to his family, had been murdered. Another man, a father and teacher, had been bested by an unknown ailment. And nearly six-hundred men were screaming for the blood of a far away people whose only crime was housing a legendary hero.

Everything was wrong.

As Jehan stared across the room at the corpse of one who had once

been a friend, for the first time in his life of solitude and silence he felt that he knew the true meaning of loneliness.

\*\*Ljǫðsálfar are the Light Elves, who live in Álfheimr. The Ásir are the principal pantheon of gods in Norse mythology, and it was comprised of Odin, Frigg, Thor, Baldr, and Týr. The Vanir is the second pantheon and is comprised of...everyone else. There was this big war, and nobody important died, and in the end they became one pantheon separated by status and origin.\*\*

\*\*And because some of you are weird and actually seem to like the obnoxiously long and random anthropological notes I leave...Here's a present in honour of my being finished with finals:\*\*

\*\*Most people have this idea that Mjǫllnir was a symbol of power. Mjǫllnir was, after all, Thor's hammer, so it makes sense that this would be the pervading conclusion. Thor would strike Mjǫllnir against his anvil, and this action would create thunder and lightning. Thunder and lightning is to strength as hammer is to power, right? Erm...Not quite. Yes, Thor was the god of thunder and (in some texts) war, but this idea of Thor as this all-powerful war-waging all-defeating god type (which, let's be real, was largely perpetuated by Marvelâ€"not that I have a problem with Marvel or Thor comics. I happen to work for Marvel translating Thor comics. Thor is good. I would not eat without Thor. Thor signs my paycheck) leaves out one very important aspect: Thor was also the god of fertility. And menstruation, which normally would make me upset because...Well, come on. A man is the patron for menstruation? Are you serious? But when you consider the fact that Thor was the god of thunder and anger and rage and the fact that he was extremely moody...It makes sense. But we're here to talk about fertility. Well, that relates to fertility, but we're here to talk about Mjǫllnir. Now, at a wedding, the symbol of Mjǫllnir was extremely important. It was traced over the marriage cup. It was traced over the couple's heads. It was traced over the bride's lower torso. Because the hammer itself represented fertility. And by fertility, I mean that Mjǫllnir was a phallic symbol. There is a reason it is always drawn shaft up. Interesting noteâ€"you can actually find Mjǫllnir on Hiccup's outfit for the second movie. It's on his belt, where charms depicting Mjǫllnir usually hung. So, now when all your friends see the poster and zero in on Hiccup's belt, and when they say, "Wait...that looks like a..." You can reply, "Yes. Yes, it is." By the way, a sword was also a phallic symbolâ€"but this is the start of the High Medieval we're talking about. Everything was phallic. The point is that Hiccup 2.0 is absolutely loaded with sex symbolism.\*\*

\*\*Feeling uncomfortable yet?\*\*

\*\*Also, if you ever have a question about anything cultural that I write and I forget to refer to it in a note, just shoot me a PM or a review and ask. I respond to every PM and every signed review. Even if you have a question regarding Vikings/Normans/Anglo-Saxons that has nothing to do with anything I have written, ask away. I'm more than happy to answer everything to the best of my abilities. And if I don't know the answer, I'll do my best to find it. Seriously. I study this. Medieval culture and anthropology is my life.\*\*

\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't. I'm not big on demanding them.\*\*

## 7. Chapter 7

**\*\*GUYSGUYSGUYSGUYSOHMYGODOHMYGODOHMYGOD!** So, I opened my mailbox today, and sitting inside was a letter from the Archaeological Institute of America. Well, I was like, "Oh? Did I get accepted for a dig I don't remember applying for?" Nope. That was not it. Instead, there was this nice and really fancy letter informing me that I had logged enough hours with the institute to be officially called a professional. The letter also said that I had logged enough hours in a specific area to be considered a specialist. **I AM OFFICIALLY A PROFESSIONAL MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGIST!** Which means that I can get grants and apply for permission to lead my own digs. I won't get either of those for a while, since you have to log a lot more hours before they consider that, but I can apply for it! Which really doesn't mean anything, since even a regular society member can do that. It's really more of a "Oh, hey, we've noticed you've worked with us a lot and have really good numbers and can dig down in a one by one meter square in increments of one or five or ten centimeters like a pro" thing. But I can call myself a professional now! So I'm buying wine and celebrating like no tomorrow. Because what else are you supposed to do when your dreams come true? Am I right?**\*\***

**\*\*Anyway,** I'm really excited about more than just that. I've waited a long time for this day...I might be a bit more excited than I should be, but...Here I am. Excited about killing off characters left and right. Excited about subjecting characters to unnecessary amounts of torment. Excited about generally ruining things. And by killing off characters, I mean the ones who actually matter. And if the ones who die don't matter, then the ones who kill them certainly do. Let the games begin. And may the odds be ever in these poor characters' favour.**\*\***

**\*\*Who am I kidding. \*\*\_\*\*I'm\*\*\_\*\*** writing this thing. The odds are never in their favour.**\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 7: Wounded\*\***

He watched as she moved around the house, so easy and free, as if she had lived there her entire life and not for two months. She chattered gaily about something, and his father made a comment from the other side of the table, and the two of them laughed.

She had told him of her suspicions four weeks after the wedding, and one month later they were certain.

His father stood up and gave him a slap on the back that Hiccup did not feel, but he smiled and nodded all the same.

He had not been ready to get married. Though, honestly, that change had been a bit less dramatic than he had been expecting. He and Astrid still led their own lives. Of course, she had moved in, and there had been an obvious change in their nightly routine, but those had been the only major alterations. He could still go off on Toothless whenever he needed to be alone, and Astrid still enjoyed plenty of quality-time with Stormfly. And while it was occasionally difficult living with her temper, and during those times his father was always certain to stay far away from the young couple, everything was good.

But...\_that\_.

It would change everything.

More responsibilities he was not sure he could keep track of. All of his time and energy devoted to one thing.

If he had not been ready to get married, he certainly was not ready to be a father.

He did not even know how to go about being a father. After his mother...Well, Stoick had admittedly not known what to do with Hiccup either, not for years.

Astrid would be fine. She would be a perfect mother. She had been raised by the perfect parents and had played the aunt to infants and toddlers for years. She always did everything right, and even when she messed up, things turned out fine in the end.

But Hiccup...Whenever he screwed up, he did so impressively.

It was more than that, though. Mothers died in childbirth. It was a fact. He did not know what he would do if he lost Astrid. And if the baby survived...How was he supposed to raise a kid without the mother?

And he had no idea what he was doingâ€

"Hiccup!"

He started and looked up at his wife. "Yeah?"

She was leaning over him and had her eyebrows knit together. "Are you alright?" She reached out and cupped his cheek. "You're all flushed."

He smiled. "Fine! Why wouldn't I be?"

She pulled her hand back and crossed her arms over her chest. "I've been trying to get your attention for five minutes."

"Oh." He looked down at the table.

A few moments passed before she sat down across from him. "What's wrong?"

He shrugged. "Just thinking."

"About what your dad said?"

What did his dad say? "Yeah."

"Hiccup, don't worry about it too much. I mean, gods, they're just \_sheep\_."

"Right."

She reached across the table and grabbed his hand. "So what's really bothering you?"

"Nothing," he said as he smiled and looked into her bright blue eyes. Then his vision slowly dropped to her middle before his eyes snapped up again.

She nodded. "I see." Astrid rose and walked around the table and took both his hands in hers. "We have seven months."

"We had four," he murmured.

"I know." She leaned over and pressed her forehead against his. "I know you weren't ready, and I know you aren't ready for this either."

He inhaled deeply. That was all he needed to hear. That she understood.

"But you're going to be an amazing father."

He pulled back from her and shook his head.

"Yes, you are." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Because you're kind and patient and everything I'm not."

"What if it doesn't like me?"

She laughed. "It will love you. I know that for a fact. I love you."

He looked up at her. "It's not going to like me just because you do," he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes and mussed his hair. "It's impossible to dislike you. Trust me. I actively tried, remember? And look where it got me."

He smiled as she leaned over and kissed him. He loved her so deeply, and while his fears and apprehensions were not alleviated, he loved her for her efforts to put him at ease.

Suddenly, Astrid gasped and pulled away and gripped his shoulder tightly.

He opened his eyes. "Astrid?"

Her own eyes were wide and locked on his. Then she slowly looked down.

He looked down as well.

Sticking out of her middle was a long arrow shaft. Dark red was already staining her clothes.

But...how? They were inside...

She whimpered and crumpled to the floor, and he dove out of his seat and caught her, shouting her name as he did. He pulled her tight to her chest and screamed for help.

"Hiccup..." she murmured.

"Help! Someone!"

She reached up and gently turned his face down toward hers. "Hiccup, I love you." She shook her head. "I haven't said it enough, I know, but..." She grimaced and pressed her hand against her abdomen. With her other hand, she reached around her back for the arrow shaft.

He grabbed her reaching hand. "Leave it!"

She shook her head again. "It hurts, Hiccup...Please..."

He bit his lip. There would be more blood. He knew he should wait for help, but then he noticed how fast her blood was staining his own tunic and how shallow her breaths were. She was beyond help, and if she would be in less pain...

So he pulled her hand away and looked down at the arrow. The head was smelted onto the hard wood, so rather than pull it off, he gripped the soft wood just a few inches down and snapped it. The arrow had a lot of spine, and the wood broke only with considerable force.

A crossbow arrow.

"You're going to be fine," he murmured, more for his own benefit than hers.

She grabbed his upper arm and squeezed tightly, and he gripped the fletching of the arrow and pulled. Astrid screamed through gritted teeth as the arrow came out.

Hiccup tossed the pieces out of sight and held her close. "You're going to be fine," he repeated. "You're going to be fine."

"Shut up," she groaned. "I'm dying, Hiccup. Don't lie to me now."

He buried his face in her hair. She was right. He did not want to admit it, but she was right.

"Hiccup," she whispered into his chest, "when you marry again?"

"I won't," he said forcefully. "I won't." How could he?

Astrid pushed herself away slightly. "Don't be stupid. You have to." She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. "You need an heir."

He pressed his lips against the top of her head. She was always so practical. She always had a plan. She always kept tradition in sight.

And the baby...\_Their\_ baby...It would be gone with her. He had not even thought about that.

"But when you do..." She coughed, a deep sound that seemed to come from her gut. "Don't...Even if you do love her?"

"I could never love anyone as much as I love you," he said.

"Good." She nodded. "Good." She coughed again and gagged.

He pulled back and saw her pressing a hand against her mouth as red slowly started seeping through the cracks between her fingers. He moved her hand away and wiped at her mouth with the back of his sleeve.

It was all so wrong.

"Hiccup," she whispered, "I'm scared. I know I shouldn't be, but..."

He held her tighter and looked up at the ceiling and blinked hard. "I'm not going to leave you," he promised. "I've got you." Two months was not enough. Two years would not have been enough. Not twenty, not forty...

The walls started to melt to nothing, the outside winter blowing cold around them.

He looked down when he felt her fingers on his jaw.

She wrapped her hand around the base of his neck and kissed him, and he kissed her back, and though the kiss tasted of blood he did not care because he knew it would be the last time. She did not have the strength to return the kiss in force, but he kissed her hard, as if he were the one dying and he needed her to stay alive.

Finally, she pushed him away and smiled. "That's for everything." Then she opened her mouth to say one final thing, but the words never came.

There was no final breath, no final sound. Her beautiful blue eyes ceased to focus, and her hand fell from his face and landed softly on the floor.

The fear and sadness that had just gripped him vanished, and he was left only with hollow disbelief. Disbelief that the girl he had loved his entire life was gone.

And when he finally looked up from her impassive face, he was no longer in his home, but in the middle of his village.

And it was burning.

There were no people, no attackers and no Vikings, in sight, though he heard screams as if those being tormented were directly beside him

He gently laid his wife on the ground and slowly stood, calling out for anyone to answer him.

No reply came but the crackle of fire and the loud, disembodied cries.

He looked down again, but she had gone, leaving only a dark crimson stain in the white snow.

And then the ground ceased to exist and he was falling, though he did not know if he were falling up or down or sideways.

He shouted for Toothless, hoping the dragon could catch him, but the



telltale scream of the Night Fury never came.

Instead, a hand in the darkness grabbed his arm. He turned instinctually and slung an arm at his attacker, but the faceless person blocked the blow, and they tumbled to the side. So he turned on his right foot, wondering only for a moment where his prosthetic had gone, grabbed his attacker by the waist, and slammed the assailant into the surface he must have been falling toward.

His attacker had clearly been anticipating this and wrapped a leg around his.

Hiccup quickly twisted away, pushed the attacker onto his stomach, and pressed his left knee into his back. He then quickly looped his right arm around the attacker's elbows and held them tight behind the man's back. And as he pressed his right leg against the assailant's knees, he wrapped his left arm under the man's neck and pulled up hard.

"Hiccup!" the attacker hissed with the strained voice of one who could not breathe. "Hiccup! Stop!"

It was then that he noticed the attacker was blonde. And then he saw it was not a man at all.

"Please, stop!"

It was Astrid, looking for all the world as if she had not been dead only seconds ago.

And she had not been, he realized. She had not died, she had not been pregnant, and he had not been married to her.

He was not married, and he would not be for another week yet.

What was more, he was not in the middle of the village at all, but in his loft.

"Let go!" she hissed as she struggled against him.

He quickly released her and scooted away and she pulled herself across the loft floor, gasping for breath. "Sorry..." he said quietly, though the word sounded empty and weak. "I just, ah..."

To his surprise, she laughed. "I should never have taught you how to do that..." Then she turned and gave him a forced grin. "That was perfect. And one leg...Very impressive."

"Sorry," he said again.

"Do you do that often?"

"Do what?"

Her grin fell and a little crease formed between her brows. "Attack people whenever they try to shake you awake. Are you alright?"

"No." Hiccup shook his head. "I mean, no, I don't. I'm fine." He glanced at the window, which was wide open. The moon was big and bright and just outside. Moon? "Wait..." He looked back at her. "What

time is it?"

She shrugged and took a deep breath. "A few hours past midnight."

"Why are you?" He shook his head. There could only be a few reasons she would sacrifice sleep to be awake in his room at such a time. "Is something wrong?"

She shook her head and leaned back on her hands. "No! No, I'm fine. Well, now I am, at least."

He looked down. "Sorry about that." He wished he could think of something better to say.

"Bad dreams?" she asked.

"Yeah." He looked back at the window. He needed to shut it to keep out the cold and his very early-to-rise dragon. He reached for his leg, but it was too far.

"Here, let me." Astrid grabbed the leg and passed it to him and he quickly started buckling the leather straps.

"Do you want to..." she prompted as she sat on the bed.

"Not really," he replied. He stood up and walked over to the window. Just outside was the unfinished house he had constructed plans for months ago. He had been putting off the roofing, and he knew he would have to start once the sun was up.

"Alright," Astrid said.

He latched the shutters from the inside and stumbled blindly back to the bed and sat next to her. He fumbled for a candle and felt around for flint, steel, and the small roll of twine he kept on the table beside his bed. If he had been able to see, he might not have needed the twine, but under the circumstances it was a necessary extra step.

"So..."

He sighed. Of course she would not leave it be. He started shredding the twine in his lap. "We...We were already married." That was a terrifying thought. But, he supposed as he stuck the flint against the steel over the shredded twine, that thought was not nearly as frightening as the next. "And you were..." A spark caught in the fibers and he quickly brought the twine to his face and blew gently.

"Sick?" she asked.

The little ball ignited and he grabbed the candle and thrust the wick into the flame.

"Crazy?"

"Pregnant," he said as he passed the lighted candle to her and dropped the burning twine on the table and snuffed out the flames with the flint.

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "I see."

He pulled away the charred ends with his fingers and rolled the twine that was not singed back into a ball and set everything back on the table. "Not very," he said as he took the candle from her and held it sideways over the little clay dish it usually sat on. "I mean, it was early, but...I just knew." Wax dripped onto the dish and he righted the candle and pressed it against the hot wax until it hardened. "You know how you just know things in dreams?" He looked at her and shrugged. "Well, I knew."

She frowned. "Did the midwife try to kill you?"

"Midwife?" He shook his head quickly. "I said it was early! We were talking!"

She scooted closer to him. "Did I try to kill you?"

What in Hel's name... "No!"

She held out her hands with her palms facing up. "I'm trying to figure out why you attacked me!"

"I'm getting there!"

She hit him lightly on his arm. "Get there faster!"

He poked her cheek. "Be patient!" He sighed when she raised one eyebrow at him. "Fine..." Patient was not her strongest virtue. "We were talking..." He took a deep breath and started at the floor and grabbed her hand. "And suddenly there was this arrow. And I don't even know where it came from!" Well, I know where it came from, but I don't know where it came from because we were downstairs and all the doors and windows were closed!

"There was this arrow," she said as she squeezed his hand.

He nodded. "Right. Arrow." He took another deep breath. "And it came out of nowhere and it hit...you."

She adjusted her grip on his hand and laced their fingers together.

"Like, we were talking, and I looked down, and...There it was." He took a shuddering breath. It was only a dream, and there was no need to still be so emotional about it. "And you collapsed, and I was holding you in the middle of the room, and then you were just gone."

Astrid pressed herself against his side. "Like, dead gone? Or \_gone\_gone?" When he did not answer, she stiffened. "Oh."

"And when I looked up, we were in the middle of the village, and everything was burning and people were screaming because we were being attacked, but I didn't see faces or any people, and then you really were gone. Like, you disappeared, and I just...fell. And then something grabbed me."

"That was me," Astrid said.

"Yeah, I know now that it was you." He lay back on his bed and put his hands beneath his head and stared up at the ceiling.

Astrid stretched out beside him and leaned on her elbow. "Do you believe in the dream thing?"

He looked at her and reached up to trace the outline of her face, and she closed her eyes and leaned into the touch. Some believed dreams held power, that the gods sent dreams as signs of one's destiny. Hiccup was not sure how much stock he put by that, though. "Not really." He dropped his hand and looked back at the ceiling. "I mean, they're so messy. It's either a jumbled mess or...It never really comes true." He brought his arm up and linked his hands under his head again. "And I usually just dream about something that's been bothering me or..." He shrugged. To him, it seemed that dreams were tricks of the mind rather than divine messages. "You know what I mean."

Astrid lay down completely, using his elbow as a pillow. "Yeah, I know." She patted his chest. "See? Don't worry about it."

He could feel the warmth of her hand through his tunic, and for the first time it struck him that they were lying together in bed. He swallowed. "I know. I'm not worried about the dream."

"But you're worried about something."

He rolled onto his side and rested his head on his arm, and she mimicked his pose. "I got a message fromâ€" He stopped himself. Whenever he said her name, Astrid always became extremely put out. "I got a message two months ago. All it said was, 'watch the south.'"

Astrid frowned. "How did you get it?"

She had figured it out. Of course she had. He had long ago realized that things had not gone as well between the two women as he had originally thought, but he had yet to figure out why. "A Terrible Terror brought it."

Astrid knit her eyebrows together. "How did she train a Terrible Terror to bring it directly to you?"

Hiccup reached out and tucked the loose strands of hair at her temple behind her ear and her expression softened. "Honestly, I have no idea. I told my dad and the council, but..." He shrugged.

She smiled. "Well, it's not likely to happen. The hofgoÃ°i said it wouldn't, so there." She cleared her throat and said a bit forcefully, "And I'm not going anywhere."

He smiled back at her. "So, why are you here?"

She hesitated before sitting up. "I just...I was thinking."

"Uh-huh." He sat up as well, but she turned her face from him. "And that's a bad thing because..."

"I was thinking about..." She turned to look at him quickly before looking away again. "The wedding."

"Oh." Hiccup rather tried to avoid thinking about it. The anxiety he had initially felt had only intensified over fourth months, for the unfair truth of the matter was that he felt no more mature or ready to marry her than he had three years ago when she had kissed him for the first time. So he avoided talking about it. At times he had even avoided her, since the closer the date loomed, the harder it was to have a conversation with her without the event coming up. "I see."

She turned toward him and smiled, though her hand brushed her hair behind her ear. It was an old nervous habit, one he had not seen from her since they had been at the hof together. "You say that like you think the wedding itself is a bad thing."

"Oh," he said. And that was all he could think of to say without betraying that, yes, he did think that on a level. "Go ahead."

She sighed. "Well, I was thinking about the past few weeks. And how it's all been going too fast. And how in just six days, I won't be home anymore. And I just started feeling prematurely...homesick, I guess." She shrugged.

He cocked his head to the side. "So you came here?" It seemed very counter-productive, fighting homesickness by leaving home.

She laughed. "Weird, isn't it? But I...I wanted to see you. And..." She tucked her hair again. "Waspnest was by earlier. She and Thorhalla were talking about Dustmite and Blackmire."

He chuckled. Astrid usually went out of her way to avoid doing anything involving Dustmite. She had for years. "What do you care about Dustmite Haraldsson?" Then he recalled Astrid's so very high opinion of her gossipy sister-in-law. "What do you care about anything Waspnest says?"

She shrugged and tucked her hair behind her ear again. "I don't, but she was going on about how Blackmire might be seeking a divorce. How they've only been married a year, and Dustmite was saying things were strange between them. That he had been pulling away..." She tucked her hair again. "That he had never really been into it all in the first place."

He grabbed her hand before she could tuck her hair back again. She was starting to make him nervous. "I still don't see why you care." He saw no cause for worry. Blackmire and Dustmite's marriage was their own business, and whatever happened between them would not interfere in Hiccup's and Astrid's relationship.

She shrugged. "I don't." Then she squeezed his hand and smiled. "I love you."

He smiled in return. "I love you back."

Her expression quickly gave way to one of confusion and worry. "Hiccup?"

"Yeah?" Why was she being so cautious? Why was she so worried? Sure,

he had tackled her upon waking up, but he was not going to do it again while he was awake.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You've been...weird. And distant. Like you've got a lot on your mind."

Oh. So that's what Dustmite and Blackmire had to do with them. That's why she was worried.

He wished he could tell her everything was fine, that he was excited beyond words for the wedding in six days. But she deserved better than a lie. And if he talked to her about it, if he could make her understand, then things would get better. They could work it out together. "Do you ever feel that we were rushed into this? That maybe...it's not...for the best?"

"Marriage?" She shook her head. "Not really." She laid her free hand on his knee. "But I'm guessing you do. What's going on?"

What wasâ€ He had just said what was going on, had he not? He felt rushed. But he did not know how to explain it in other terms. "I don't know."

She leaned toward him. "That's not an answer."

He flexed his fingers. "I guess...I just don't feel ready."

"Neither do I," she whispered, and he almost embraced her in his relief, but she laughed and continued, "There's still so much to prepare! And we only have a week!"

Hiccup felt his stomach tighten uncomfortably. "No, that's not...Never mind." She would not understand. They were in completely different places, as usual.

She bit her lip and furrowed her brow. "You don't want to get married in a week."

He looked down at his hands. "Not exactly..." He was not sure he'd be ready to get married in a month. Maybe if he had a year...

"Wait..." He heard her breath catch as she asked, "At all?"

He looked up quickly. "No!" He grabbed her hands. "Someday. But not now. We're so young. We're only seventeen...Well...I mean, you're not even that yet!" She would not be for another two months.

"Everyone gets married this young, Hiccup." She shook her head. "When you consider that one of us might not live to see forty...It's smart."

"That was during the war," he pointed out.

She simply sat and stared at him for what seemed an eternity, then she slowly smiled. "Oh...I think I get it." She nodded. "You're just a little anxious. It's coming up fast, and you're nervous." He pulled her hand from his and touched his chest lightly. "Hiccup, it's going to be alâ€"

"Then I've been anxious since the day it was settled." He was not nervous. Nerves did not come into it. He was not ready. Honestly, he felt no more mature than he had felt three years earlier when he had first walked into the Ring.

"And you never said anything?" she asked as she rose to her feet and gripped his bedpost. With her free hand, she gestured between them. "We could have talked about thisâ€"

"I did!" he insisted as he stood as well. "Months ago! I told you I was nervous when we went to the \_hof\_, and I've mentioned it several times since, and you neverâ€"

"So this is \_my\_ fault?"

"What? No!" Gods, \_women\_! How did she even jump to that conclusion? "I just thought it would go away! But you were always so..." He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. "You never really got what I was trying to say! And you were so excited and I just couldn'tâ€"

"So you're trying to explain \_now\_?" she demanded shrilly as her face twisted with fury. "Six days before I become your \_wife\_? That's when you decide to tell me you don't want to get married?" She threw her hands up. "Oh, I suppose you think you're doing me a favour! You could have told me the day of!"

He reached out to her. "Astrid, calm down!"

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down!" She marched up to him and poked him hard in the chest. "Marriage is a normal part of life! Everyone goes through it!"

"It's a major change andâ€"

"It's a major change for me too!" She turned away from him. "Gods, Hiccup! I am giving up \_everything\_ for this! My family, my home..." She wheeled around. "But I'm not panicking like you are!"

He had not seen her this angry in years. He had not seen her this angry since Dragon Training. And while he was frightened of her rage, he was more scared of what came after. "Alright. I'm not doing a good job of explaining this. I am terrified, andâ€"

"And you're trying to run away!" she shouted. "Admit it, Hiccup! You're a coward! Well guess what? You can't just fly Toothless away from this oneâ€"

"I'm not ready!" he cried. Then he threw his arms out. "Look at us! You're ready, I'm not...It could destroy us!"

She folded her arms over her chest and raised her chin and said quite calmly, "You actually doing a fine job of that on your own right now."

There it was. What came after her anger. That quiet, deadly rage. He had no idea what came after that. Maybe his death. "Astrid, I love youâ€"

She shrugged and said almost flippantly, "Then I don't see why you're

thinking all of this."

He pressed his lips together. "It's because..."

For a brief second, her expression faltered. Her lips twitched, she glanced away, and he could see that she was just as scared as she was angry. She was scared of what he might do, of what his next words might be. But it was only for an instant, and then the calm front was back. "Because what?"

He did not even know how to make her see when she was like that. "You don't understand..."

"Then make me, Hiccup!" she said with a slight break in her voice. The calm melted away and she grabbed his arms. "Make me understand! Please."

He did not want to even try. They were both frustrated, and he could not even begin to explain things properly when he was frustrated. All he could do was rehash everything he had already said. But he sighed anyway and began, "Think about our lives for a minute. Think about everything that's going to change." Marriage meant a change in pace, a change in living habits, a change in everything. "Think about everything we're about to give up. The freedoms we're going to lose." And then there was the responsibility involved, but Astrid was always prepared for new responsibilities. She would never understand that part. "Are you ready for this?"

She released him and wrapped her arms around herself. "I've been preparing for this since the day I was born. All girls do! Of course I'm ready. And youâ€"

"See?" he cried in exasperation. "I knew you would not be able to get it!"

She took a step back. "Whaâ€"

"Because you're you!" He pointed an accusing finger at her. "And you always do exactly what everyone expects and exactly what you're supposed to do and you always do it exactly the way it should be done because damn everything else when you can have three hundred years of stone cold tradition, right?"

She gasped and brought a hand to her mouth and shook her head.

Oh, gods. What had he done? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." There was nothing wrong with tradition, he knew. Sometimes tradition led to unnecessary prejudices, as he knew all too well, but it kept people together. It made people understand one another. And her adherence to it was admirable. "That's actually one of the reasons I fell for you in the first place."

She made a small sound like a hiccough and turned away from him.

"Astrid don't...Turn around. Please."

When she did, her arms were folded over her chest, which was rising and falling quickly, and she was blinking rapidly as she refused to look at him.



"Oh, gods." He reached out to her. "Astrid, I'm not saying any of this to hurt you."

"Well, you have, Hiccup," she snapped in a strained voice. "You've hurt me."

He touched her cheek lightly. If he acted fast, he could repair the damage. "Heyâ€"

"Don't touch me!" She grabbed his hand and twisted it away from his body until he doubled over from the pain shooting up his arm. She then kned him in the stomach and sent him stumbling back into the table by his bed.

For a brief moment, he could do nothing but shake his head and stare at her in shock. Then anger took over. "What is wrong with you?" he demanded. "Why do you \_do \_that? Why do you always attack when you're upset? Why can't you justâ€" He stopped when she whimpered slightly and pressed a hand against her chest and grabbed his bed post, seemingly for support, as her legs were shaking. "I'm sorry." He winced. "I don't know what...Astridâ€"

"It's me," she said in a broken whisper.

"No!" Gods, now he had done it. "It's not youâ€"

She shook her head and collapsed on his bed as her breath came in short, quick gasps. "I can't believeâ€"

"It's not you! I'm sorry!" How could he have let himself imply that? He put his hands on either side of his head and scrunched his hair in his fists in frustration with himself. "I've said everything all wrong..." He sat next to her and put a hand on her knee. "Look, I'm not backing out. I just need to talk this out and..."

She bit her lip and looked away from him, still shaking her head.

"Astrid." He grabbed one of her hands and held it tight. "I'm still going to marry you in six days, but I need to talkâ€"

"No," she choked out, "you're not. You wouldn't be saying all of this if you were going to..."

"I'm just anxious and scared of the changes and the commitment, and I don't feel ready to get married andâ€"

"No, you don't \_want\_ to get married." She pulled her hand back and wiped furiously at her eyes. "You don't \_want\_ me. You don't \_want\_ any of this and I don't know what I've doneâ€"

"Astrid! It's not you!" He silently cursed himself. "How many times...I've wanted you since I was a kid."

She bent over her knees and put her head in her hands. "But you don't want to marry me," she whispered.

He ran his hand through his hair. "I'm saying I don't feel readyâ€"

"Stop," she said quietly.

"Astridâ€"

"Stop talking," she said a bit louder before she said with an unmistakable strain, "Please."

Oh, gods. She was actually crying. Well, how wonderful was he? He felt sick. "Please don't..." He put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't know what to do when youâ€"

"Shut \_up\_!" She screamed as she smacked his hand away.

The trapdoor suddenly flew open and his dad emerged through the square hole in the floor. "What in Hel's name is going on upâ€" He stopped when he saw Astrid sitting on the bed and doubled over with silent sobs. "Oh. Um..."

Hiccup looked down at the floor and then at his father. "Sorry, Dad."

Stoick nodded once. "Right. I'll just be um..." He wrung his hands. "Yep. I'm going to..." He pointed down. "I'll just go back downstairs." He disappeared through the hole again and the door slammed shut after him.

Hiccup looked at the girl he loved, the girl who was quietly crying next to him, and wished he could say the right thing. But doing things without messing up had never really been his strong suit. "Astrid? Are you alright?"

"No, Hiccup," she snapped tearfully. "Amazingly, I'm not."

He swallowed. "Is there anything I canâ€"

"You can be quiet."

For a few minutes they just sat there, him silently looking from her to his hands and her sniffing occasionally.

He thought for a moment about how everything sounded to her ears. Viking women got married. There was no option outside of that. A woman unwanted or abandoned was a woman dishonoured. Astrid was lucky enough have been born on an island where women were still allowed in battle. But she still had one expectation, and it was one of the heaviest and most important in society. She would get married one day, she would have children, and she would raise them in the exact same traditions in which she had been raised. There was no honour, no chance at Valhalla outside of that. And if he walked away from her, and he supposedly \_loved \_her, no one would want her. And then what? It was no wonder she was upset.

Astrid let out a loud sob and quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

Upset was putting it mildly.

A heavy, sticky ball of guilt settled deep inside him

Finally, he murmured, "I wasn't going to...I just needed to talk about it. I probably should have said something to someone sooner." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Ok, I definitely should have said something to someone sooner. But..." He reached out for her chin. "Look at me."

She slapped his hand.

"Or don't. That's fine too." He puffed up his cheeks and blew. "I...It's been going around in my head for months, and I can't...I needed..."

She inhaled sharply.

"I made a promise," he said. "In front of witnesses, in front of the gods. I know I did. And I'm not trying to get away from that. I just need some time to settle into the ideaâ€"

"You've had four months," she said. She looked up at him then. Her eyes were rimmed with red and her cheeks were blotched with pink.

His gut tightened. "I know. I know, I justâ€"

He was cut off by a loud crash and scream outside. "What was that?" he asked.

Another crash sounded, followed by an explosion. If it were not a ridiculous idea, he would have thought they were being attacked by dragons again.

He ran to his window and threw it open just as Toothless jumped from the roof and growled up at him. "What is it, Bud?" Then he looked up. "Thor Almighty..." Two houses down the hill were already on fire, and a huge flaming ball was head for another barn. Out at sea he could see the glow of at least thirty ships, all lit up with torches.

He had warned them...

"We're under attack..."

He looked down at her. He had not even noticed her coming to stand beside him. He cleared his throat and started climbing through the window. "Stay here."

She snorted. "Yeah, I'll just do that."

"I'm serious." He dropped down and landed in Toothless' saddle. As he adjusted himself and his feet, he looked up and saw her following him out the window. Any day he would admit that she was better equipped to handle an attack than he was. She was probably better equipped to handle an attack than half the village. But at that moment... "Stay there! You don't have a weapon or Stormfly right nowâ€"

Astrid let herself drop to the ground and somersaulted to her feet. "Damn it, Hiccup! I'm not your wife!" Then she took off running down the hill.

"Astrid!" He called after her, but she disappeared without looking back. He groaned and clipped his metal foot into place and slid the

pedal forward. "Alright, Bud. Let's go."

Toothless shot into the sky so quickly Hiccup almost lost his grip on the saddle. He pulled himself up and looked down as they rose higher, searching for a sign of Astrid, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Not that he should have worried. The fires were far, and if anyone could make it to weapons and a dragon without getting lost in carnage, she could.

An image of Astrid dying from an arrow to the stomach flashed through his mind, but he shrugged it off and leaned forward. "Let's go get a good look at those guys."

There were benefits to riding the fastest dragon, Hiccup knew. And there were benefits to riding a dragon as black as the night. He took advantage of those benefits then and crouched low on Toothless' back as the dragon raced toward the ships on the waves.

Hiccup squinted against the wind. Thirty. Just as he had guessed. They were arriving in a sort of formation, with groups of ten in uneven lines.

Just then, something bright and burning came sailing at his head and Toothless dove, but not quite soon enough, for a drop of fire fell on Hiccup's shoulder. He quickly smacked it out, but his hands came away sticky. He sniffed his fingers, licked them, and gagged.

Pitch. They were rocks covered in pitch and set alight.

Of course.

He patted Toothless' side. "Alright, Bud. We got what we need. Let's round up the others and make a plan."

Toothless turned smoothly, but pulled up short as soon as he was facing Berk.

"Toothless! Whatâ€" Hiccup sucked in air and held it tight when he saw the harbour. Twenty ships he had not at first seen, twenty ships that would have been invisible were it not for a convenient parting of the clouds at that moment, twenty ships most likely armed to the teeth were pulling onto the shore. "Oh, no." He leaned over and patted Toothless again. "Fast."

Toothless let out his unmistakable war scream and flew straight for Berk. When they landed in the swarming center of the village, Hiccup flung himself off the saddle and ran toward his father, who was headed toward the cliff edge with his hammer in hand.

"Dad!" Hiccup caught up with Stoick and grabbed his arm. "About fifty ships, Dad." He pointed down toward the dock. "Some have alreadyâ€"

"Stoick!" Hoark ran up to the chief and used his sword to gesture toward the harbour. "Ten ships have made landing. Ten more right behind."

Stoick looked up at the running men and women, all preparing for battle. "Raise the torches!"

"No!" Hiccup shouted. "Don't light them! Put every light out!" There were still thirty ships at sea, all armed with long-distance weapons. The torches would just be a target. "Don't let them see anything! If they can't see to aim, they can only shoot blindly!"

Stoick put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "Son..."

He looked up at his father. "The rocks are covered in pitch! They light them!"

"Sonâ€" "

"They have torches!" Hiccup continued. "We can see them! We'll have the advantage if we go dark andâ€" "

"Hiccup!" Stoick shook the boy slightly. "We don't have time for strategy right now! We're unprepared, so we have to fight this the way we've fought everything." He nodded to Hoark. "Light them."

The man nodded and ran off.

Stoick released his hold on Hiccup, who grabbed his father's arm and said, "But, Dadâ€" "

"Hiccup, I need you and Toothless taking out the ships in the harbour." Stoick nodded and pulled out of Hiccup's grasp. "Make sure they can't escape!"

"What about me?" Gobber asked as he ran up to them. "Fire up the forges again?"

Stoick shook his head. "No, Gobber, we're not fighting dragons this time. There'll be no time for repairs." He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'll need you with me."

"Dadâ€" "

Stoick turned around. "Go, Hiccup!" He and Gobber ran down the hill toward the docks.

Hiccup just stood stunned. It was a mistake. They had to divide forces and concentrate further out. Soon those ships would reach the island, and they would be overwhelmed.

"Alright," Ruffnut's voice said behind him. "So what are we actually doing?"

He turned and saw her and Tuffnut and Snotlout, all wearing their signature smirks and standing with their dragons. Fishlegs landed behind them and grinned. And behind him...

Astrid. She was looking down as she dismounted, refusing to meet his eyes.

She had brought them.

"Really?" he asked quietly, overcome with delight. Even when they were fighting, they still operated as a perfect team. She knew exactly what he would need.

"Of course!" Fishlegs volunteered. "We followed you once. We'll do it again."

Hiccup grinned. Not the response he had been looking for, but it was nice to hear, even if it were ridiculous. It was not as if he were some sort of war hero.

He looked at the twins. "I need you two with me. Fishlegs, you come with me too."

"What about us?" Snotlout asked.

Hiccup shook his head. They needed the dark. "Stormfly is too bright, and your dragon lights up. You'll give us away." He pointed to both of them. "You two, take care of the ships in the harbour."

Astrid snorted and looked at Stormfly.

"Can we flame up?" Snotlout asked eagerly.

Hiccup shrugged. It was Snotlout's dragon. "If it will make them burn faster."

Snotlout grinned and pulled himself onto Hookfang's neck and the pair flew toward the docks.

Hiccup jogged to Astrid and caught her wrist before she got back on Stormfly's back. "Thank you," he murmured. "And be safe."

She jerked her wrist away. "Nice of you to care." She swung herself up, and Stormfly lifted from the ground and flew away.

"Ooh..." Tuffnut said. "Trouble in paradise already?"

Hiccup sighed and faced the remaining three. "I need us to go further out."

Fishlegs held up a finger. "Your dad saidâ€"

"Forget what my dad said." Hiccup pointed out to the tiny flicking lights on the ocean. "We need to take those out so they don't come any closer. Then we can trap the ones in the harbour. Got it?"

Fishlegs nodded. "What do we do?"

"I need you and Meatlug to follow me. We're going to destroy whatever catapults they have."

Fishlegs shifted. "And the ships?"

Hiccup pressed his lips together. He did not like it, but he would do whatever he had to do to keep his people safe. "If we have to take out a ship, we have to take out a ship." He looked at the twins. "Ruff, Tuff, go directly in front of the line. Leave as big a trail of gas as you can manage before it thins. Then light it up."

Tuffnut folded his arms. "And if they have crossbows?"

That was true. Being in front would put them in line of fire for bows, if not for siege weapons. "Then go above the hips and set it off. Just the ten nearest us. Got it?"

"That could destroy the ships," Tuffnut pointed out.

Hiccup frowned. "Yeah, it could. As soon as you've finished, head back here and help Astrid and Snotlout."

Ruffnut made a mock salute. "Got it chief."

He nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

Toothless bounded up to him, and Hiccup swung himself into the saddle and clicked the pedals into place. The dragon took off once again, shooting high into the night sky.

Hiccup glanced behind him and nodded when he saw the others directly behind him. Good. After a few seconds had passed, he waved to Ruffnut and Tuffnut, and Barf and Belch dove toward the ocean.

Toothless stayed on course for just a bit longer, and then dove toward the second line of ships. He let out a scream and blasted three masts at once. Meatlug was just behind, firing lava at towers and catapults.

Hiccup almost laughed. What were they expecting to do with the siege towers? Climb the cliffs?

The men on the ships' decks started shouting incomprehensibly and leveling their crossbows. Hiccup saw a few longbowmen. That was not good. Crossbows may have packed a harder punch than a longbow, but longbowmen were strong and sharp and accurate.

"Pull up!" he shouted before Toothless turned upward and flew into the clouds.

"Where are Ruffnut and Tuffnut?" Fishlegs shouted behind him.

The question had hardly left his mouth when the clouds below them lit up with yellow and a deafening sound exploded in Hiccup's ears. "I'm guessing there."

The Zippleback shot through the clouds and hovered near Toothless.

Tuffnut threw his arms out. "Ta-da!" he sang.

"How was that for an explosion?" Ruffnut asked.

Hiccup smiled. "Perfect." He looked back toward the shore. "Let's go."

"Uh, Hiccup?" Fishlegs said. "There are more—"

"I know." They had lost the element of surprise. He had been counting on that. The third line would either flee or have to waste time moving around the wreckage of the other ships. "I know, but we need to head back."

He heard the sounds of violence before he saw it—the clashing of steel against steel, the war cries, the bashing and splintering of wood. He saw his father using his hammer to strike down three men at a time. Stoick had taken down countless Monstrous Nightmares. Men were hardly a challenge. He saw Gobber fighting by Stoick's side in his lopsided, careless way. He saw hundreds of men on the beach and only a few ships still floating. And he saw Snotlout and a flaming Hookfang descend upon a ship with maniacal laughter and growling.

But he did not see \_her\_.

And he was frightened by that. He had dreamed of an attack. Who was to say the other half of the dream would not come to pass? Who was to say dreams could not reveal the future?

Then he did see her, flying quickly on Stormfly, who blasted a hole in the hull of one of the few remaining ships and shot up toward the cliff.

Hiccup let out a relieved sigh and turned his attention to one ship where several soldiers were loading a large rock into a catapult.

"Still got some go, Bud?"

Toothless gurgled and rolled his shoulders.

"That's what I thought."

Toothless dove and fired a single blast at the catapult just as the soldiers released the weight.

The catapult burst apart, but he had been too late. The weapon had already released its ammunition, and he turned his head and froze when he saw the trajectory of the stone.

He could not speak. He could not call her name. He could only watch in horror as the rock hit her and Stormfly, separating the two and sending the girl plummeting to earth.

Then his voice came back. "Astrid!" He leaned over Toothless. "Go, Bud! Go!"

Toothless raced toward the cliff and circled around her.

"Astrid!" Hiccup jumped from the saddle and ran to her before Toothless touched the ground. He dropped to his knees, grabbed her arm, and rolled her over.

Oh, gods...He swallowed hard to keep himself from vomiting when he saw the state of her right leg. It looked as if something had carved her flesh away from the top of her leg, from the knee to the ankle. Blood was pouring from the wound, but it was minimal damage, as he had been expecting far worse.

"Damn it..." He brushed her hair back from her face. Was she awake? "Astrid!"

She slapped him smartly and sat up. "Don't \_touch \_me!"



He shook his head. "Astrid, you're hurtâ€"

"I don't need your help!"

He ground his teeth in fearful frustration. He would not let her bleed out. "For the love of Freyr, Astrid! You need to get out of here! Get somewhere safeâ€"

"I will leave when I need to!"

"Well, you need to!" he said. Could she not feel pain? "Have you seen your leg?" When she looked down, he quickly tried to cover the wound with his hands. The sight might send her into shock. "On second thought, don'tâ€"

She pushed his hands aside and froze. The colour drained from her face. "Oh, gods."

He reached for her but did not touch her. "Please, let me help you."

She pushed away from him. "Don't. I'll help myself."

He groaned. "Astrid, now is not the time for that!" He grabbed her elbow and she jerked her arm out of his grasp. "You need help now. You need to cauterize itâ€"

"Give me your knife," she said and held out her hand.

"I don't have it." He did not sleep with it, and sleeping was precisely what he had been doing before everything had gone wrong. "Please, letâ€"

Astrid shook her head and tried to push herself up. "I don't need your help. I'll be fine on my own." She cried out in pain when she put weight on her right leg, and she fell forward.

"You can't walk on that!"

Stormfly, seemingly unhurt, suddenly landed next to Astrid and lowered herself to the ground.

"I don't need to," Astrid said as she grabbed Stormfly's spines and pulled herself onto the dragon's back.

As Stormfly straightened and stretched her wings for flight, Hiccup grabbed Astrid's hand. "Wait...Promise meâ€"

"They're turning back!" a voice from the harbour called.

"Let them run!"

"The cowards!"

Hiccup looked out to sea and saw that the last line of ships had indeed changed course.

"Just go," Astrid said quietly before she pulled her hand away from him and Stormfly took flight.

Hiccup watched her go before turning to look down over the harbour where the last Norman survivors were dropping their weapons.

Those men would die as well, Hiccup knew. Vikings did not view surrender as honourable. And Berkians did not keep prisoners or slaves.

Toothless weaseled his head under Hiccup's hand and growled.

Hiccup nodded and scratched the dragon's neck. "Yeah. I know, Bud."

It was not over. One side's retreat did not mean they could not regroup and return. He had learned that from the dragons. The only way to end it was to take out the leader.

But how was he to kill a king who was safe in his castle hundreds of miles away?

\*\*Well, I didn't kill her, but I did manage to make things a lot worse. And I got to show you how to light a candle the Viking way. Yeah, massive time-skip, but trust me when I say you did not want four months of filler.\*\*

\*\*So my GPS tried to kill me a few weeks weeks ago. Have I mentioned my psychotic GPS yet? I don't think I have. Her name is Gladys. After GLaDOS. Because she's a complete psychopath. Gladys has driven me into drug deals before. Like, once I was diving along, and she told me to turn onto this dead-end street (just for kicks, apparently, since it's not a necessary place to go and she just puts me right back on the same route). So I drove to the end of this street so I could turn around and make her reroute me, and I swear to God there was a meth deal going down. She also takes me to locations I punch in and makes sure to drive me to the middle of the woods where Slender Man probably lives before she actually decides to tell me the address does not actually exist. I'm telling you, she's crazy, and she actively tries to kill me on a semi-regular basis. Well, a few weeks ago, I drove to Rutherfordton, North Carolina. And I was on my way to my friend's house to celebrate Thanksgiving with her family, and Gladys told me to turn left onto this side street. Well, I slowed down and looked to my left before turning, and I thought, "Uh, it looks like there's a building in the way, but sure. Whatever you say, Gladys." I figured the road must turn at some point before it hits the building. So I turned down this road and I drove for a while. There was no place the road turned. There were no other roads branching off. Just this little driveway leading up to the fence surrounding this building. Yes, fence. Not gate. I have no clue where the gate was. It was a metal fence. So I stopped at the fence because of three reasons. The first was that it was a fence. The second was the the road just...ended. Right there. In front of the fence. The third reason, and probably the most important, was that the fence had a sign on it. The sign said quite plainly that it was an electric fence. Well I just sat there for a moment, waiting for Gladys to reroute me, as she usually does when I refuse to follow her directions. Finally, Gladys said, "Please drive forward." And I did not. Instead, I reversed out of there and turned back on the road and kept driving until she rerouted me down a different street. And that's my story for the day.\*\*

**\*\*Did anyone else notice the Old Norse in *\*\*\_\*\*Frozen\*\*\_\*\**? Because I totally did. First the coronation choir was singing in Old Norse, and then the priest started speaking in it and I was like, "HA! I SPEAK THAT LANGUAGE! And everyone said I would never use Old Norse. Well, take THAT. Did they understand what the minister was saying? I think NOT!" I always knew it would come in useful...\*\***

**\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't. I'm not big on demanding them.\*\***

**\*\*And Merry Christmas! Happy Snoggletog! And Happy Time of the Doctor/Downton Abbey Special/Whatever it is you're into.\*\***

## 8. Chapter 8

**\*\*Holy shit! I posted a chapter! Look who's actually alive...So this took forever. I know. No need to tell me. In my defense, I work three jobs (one of which is full time) in addition to being a full-time student. I did just get off break, during which time I wrote this and the next three chapters. Out of order, because that's how I do (in case you were wondering why things take so long, it's because I don't go in order; it is a writing method that works for me). And I am promising a chapter before Passover starts. So get excited.\*\***

**\*\*Finally...I respond to all signed reviews regardless of content, but not unsigned, since...well, it's not possible to do so personally (I'm an anthropologist. I do things personally), and if I responded in a note, we'd be here all day. But...I'm going to answer a few questions here:\*\***

**\*\*How did you decide [archaeology is] what you wanted to do? Is it fun? My school offers study abroad in archaeology. Would you recommend trying it? / Absolutely. Go. Try it. It's unlike anything you've ever done before. It takes a special sort of OCD, though. I've always known I wanted to go into archaeology. Ever since I was five. That's not a joke. I find it incredibly fun and exciting, but, as the archaeologist I work under always says, "If digging down in a one by one meter square in increments of approximately five or ten centimeters for a month with the end result of finding absolutely nothing but different colours of dirt doesn't give you a rush, don't become an archaeologist."\*\***

**\*\*Do you speak Old English? / Yes. My friends actually tease me about it, because I get super pumped when I get to speak OE or ON, but I just tell them that it's fine. They can be weird and not be interested in this stuff. I don't judge.\*\***

**\*\*How do you pronounce your characters' names? / Any way I like, really. They all have official pronunciations, so get ready for some IPA. Ymma is officially /\*\*\*\*Ê•\*\*\*\*ma/ but I usually say /\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>a</sup>\*\*\*\*ma/. Finna (whose full name is Finna Haugen. I think I've used it...once) is officially /vina-hau\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>f</sup>\*\*\*\*'en/ but I usually say /f\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>a</sup>\*\*\*\*na-hog\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>TM</sup>\*\*\*\*n/. Jehan is the only one I pronounce with any consistency, and I use the official pronunciation, which is /d\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>'</sup>Ê<sup>'</sup>\*\*\*\*n/. It's similar to the Standard American "John" as /d\*\*\*\*Ê<sup>'</sup>Ê<sup>'</sup>\*\*\*\*n/, but the vowel sound is more centralized (rather than back) and a tiny bit more closed.\*\***

**\*\*You work for Marvel? / Ha. I did when I posted that. My contract actually recently expired and at the same time my contract with another company\*\*\*\*â€|\*\*\*\*went active? I'm a contract translator, which means I whore out my multilingual-ness to whomever will hire me. So, yes, I used to work for Marvel. Now, however, I work for...um...DreamWorks. AND I HAVEN'T SEEN THE MOVIE SO DON'T BOTHER ASKING. EVEN IF I HAD, I WOULD NEVER TELL YOU ANYTHING BECAUSE MY JOB IS WORTH MORE TO ME THAN YOUR HTTYD FEELS. \*\*\_\*\*DEAL WITH IT\*\*\_\*\*. \*\***

**\*\*Chapter 8: Mistaken\*\***

"Do you ever think really hard about boredom?"

Rust snorted. "You can't be bored already."

Finna shrugged. "I am."

"We're not even in the meeting yet."

She shrugged again. "The anticipation of the boredom is boring enough." She scuffed the sole of her shoe along the hard earth beneath her feet and kicked up a small cloud of dust. The ground grew more packed with use as one ventured further into town, and she was nearing the heart, where the Great Hall, a last-standing remnant from past centuries of Things and wars, stood.

"How will I ever keep you entertained when we're married?" Rust mused.

She grinned and spun to face him as she rounded a corner. "Find me a decent lover."

He nodded seriously. "I was planning to, but who's to say you won't get 'bored' with him?"

She turned back around and stopped just in time for a scrawny cat followed by two children to run directly across her path. "Find me a really good one, then." She began walking again.

"I'll look into it," he said. "A decent father."

She rolled her eyes. "Why would I need one of those when I have you?"

"Someone needs to be looking after the children," he reasoned. "And I'll have my hands full keeping track of you all day."

She nodded. "True."

"Maybe one who tells stories."

She wrinkled her nose. "What would I do with a story-teller?" she asked as she came upon the outer edges of a crowd gathered for a glimpse at the Norman guests.

"Listen to him?" Rust said as he followed her through the throng of people.

"Right." She sighed and emerged from the crowd and made her way to

where her father stood before the doors of the Great Hall. "Just make sure he's good looking."

"I can do that," he said. "But don't get too attached to him. You know I'll always have to be first in your life."

She grinned at him as she stopped at her father's side. "You always will be."

Her father let out a series of deep, harsh coughs and the sound pierced her core. She had been steeling herself against inevitability for months. The rose spots had appeared on his chest and back, and the fever and delirium would soon set in. He did not have long.

And after his time had come, the parliament would meet in the large wooden building behind them. It would be the first meeting in her lifetime, and it would only serve as a formality. No one had a viable claim to the title of chief, and no one would dare to purport that he had.

She estimated three weeks.

"Let's just get this over with," her father said. "We all have things to be doing."

Finna patted his arm. "You should take today off. Rest."

Baldi shook his head. "Damn that. I'm a chief, and I won't be beaten yet." He smiled at her. "So don't tell me I am."

"I just worry about you," she said.

"I know."

She looked up in time to see the small crowd of Vikings parting for a group of seven men. Their leader seemed to be older than the rest, old enough to be a father while the others were barely older than boys, and he wiped sweat from his brow as he stopped in front of the chief and Finna.

He and two others wore mail, and the rest were clad in leather. One of the men wearing mail was very familiar to her, and when he saw her, his eyes widened and he looked away.

"Oh, gods." Rust leaned close to her and whispered, "That's him, isn't it? The one you—"

"Quiet." Simon was his name.

"He looks positively terrified."

She grinned. "He's about to be more so." As soon as he realized that she had understood everything he had said—

"Tell them to get into the hall so we can finish this and get these asses out of here," her father grumbled.

Finna smiled at the man leading the band and said in the Norman tongue, "The chief welcomes you to our home."

He scratched his neck with one hand and gripped his sword hilt tightly with the other. "We areâ€|honoured to be welcomed."

She cast a glance at Simon, who had paled considerably and was staring at her in horror. "The honour is ours."

"No," her father said. "I want you to tell them what I'm saying."

"I am," she assured him.

"None of that scraping nonsense. We don't bow and scrape on our own land."

She patted his arm. "I know. Their language always sounds simpering and weak."

Baldi laughed gruffly and coughed. "Let's just go in and hear what they have to say." He turned and started toward the doors of the Great Hall.

Finna gestured to the doors. "The chief asks that he who wishes to speak step into our Hall. All others should remain outside."

Rust leaned in again. "Where do you want me?"

"Stay here," she told him. "If I call for you, come immediately." She did not trust these men.

Rust looked at Simon and snickered.

"Restrain yourself."

He shrugged. "He's not my type."

She nudged him with her elbow. "You know what I mean." The gods had delivered a very entertaining toy to him, and she knew he would take advantage.

Rust shrugged again and moved to talk to Kali and Kona, who stood near the doors. Rasch sat to their side and sharpened his sword with a smooth stone.

Finna looked up at the head soldier. "Sieur, we ask that you leave all weapons outside. This is a hall of conversation, not war."

The soldier nodded and removed his sword and handed it to the young man called Simon. Finna copied the action and removed the belt that held her dagger. She kept a knife hidden in the leather wrapped around her torso, just in case. Trusting an enemy never proved wise.

She turned and followed her father through the doors. "Are you thirsty, Sieur?"

The soldier answered. "Itâ€|is a warm day."

Finna snapped her fingers at one of the thrall girls wiping down the tables in the hall. "TÃ; tart air. Faigh fÃ-on."

The thrall girl quickly ran out the doors.

Her father reached the door that led to the smaller meeting chamber. "Why are you catering to him?" He coughed. "I hope she poisons that wine."

Finna smiled and looked at the soldier. "The chief asks if your ride was pleasant in spite of the heat?"

The soldier nodded and glanced about him as he entered the smaller room. "Ah. Yes."

The fire was already burning, and the windows had been opened for extra light. Six chairs surrounded a table in the middle of the room. Baldi dropped into the largest chair with a groan.

Finna sat in another chair and gestured to the others. "Please, sit."

As he did so, the thrall girl burst in with a glass bottle and three wooden cups. She set them on the table and poured the wine before stepping back. The soldier picked up the cup nearest him, but he only eyed the drink with suspicion.

Finna smiled. She would have the same concerns. She gave her own cup to the girl. "DÃ- sÃ©."

The girl took the cup and drank before handing the wine back to Finna.

The soldier smiled then and drank from his own cup.

Finna waved her hand. "FÃ;g dÃ°inn."

The girl nodded and left the room.

The soldier set his cup on the table and cleared his throat. "I was sent by our acting Captain to ensure that the peace between us remain honoured."

Acting Captain. Finna smiled. She was, of course, aware that the true Captain had left for the North weeks before.

"What's he saying?" her father asked.

She patted his arm. "Something incredibly stupid." She turned to the soldier and said in the Norman tongue, "Have you reason to doubt that we would uphold our end?" The Rowdy Ruckuses would not be the ones to break the treaty. They had more honour than that.

He looked surprised for a moment. "No, but we have reason to believe you are building ships."

She nodded. "We are Vikings. We are traders. We are always building ships."

"What are you telling him?" Baldi demanded.

"That they're all idiots," she replied. Her father nodded in satisfaction.

The soldier drained his cup of wine. "Our Captain wishes that youâ€¦stop building ships."

She raised her chin. "Does he?"

"And we would ask that for the time being, until our company returns, that you and your people not leave this island."

Finna clenched her teeth and smiled. The entire meeting so far had been naught but insult, and now the Normans, who had no power over the Ruckuses or their land, demanded that the Vikings stay under self-imposed arrest. Did they expect that the Vikings would acquiesce with a simple nod and smile? Some believed in not killing a messenger, but Finna felt sent a very clear reply. This soldier would be lucky if he left with his life, what with the demands he had made.

She turned to her father and almost repeated the ridiculous request, but a new thought occurred to her: Why must they remain on their island?

Hiccup. She had warned him when they troupes had marched north, and she could only hope that he had been prepared.

"Something happened on Berk," she said.

Baldi furrowed his brow. "What happened?"

"I don't know. They don't want us to help."

"Damn that. Stoick is my friend. You tell him that..." He stopped and coughed hard.

While he fought to overcome his fit, Finna told the soldier, "The chief wonders why we must stay. You have no hold over us. This is not your land, but ours. If we choose to leave you cannot stop us." She bowed her head and smiled. "As the chief says."

The soldier looked at a loss. Then he stood slowly. His hand twitched at his side where his sword was supposed to be. "Thenâ€¦" He cleared his throat again. "I suppose we are finished."

Finna turned to her father, but he waved his hand. "I understood that much."

She nodded and walked past the soldier to the door, opened it, and called for Rust. She wanted the company followed on their return, and she could trust him to be silent and thorough and quick.

Before she had let the door close, she heard it. The familiar sound of metal being drawn from polished leather, the sound of a strangled gasp and a cough.

Time seemed to crawl. Wind rushed past her ears and blocked out all sound as she turned and saw the soldier pull a long, thin dagger down and out from her father's middle at a sickeningly slow pace.

Her heart thudded and she exhaled.



She reached for the digger hidden in the leather protecting her torso.

He was stronger than she was, taller than she was, and he could kill her in a moment if she were careless. He was better protected, clad in mail and leather. She could never penetrate his middle with her blade, and she would have to be quick and make every movement count.

But she had one perfect advantage: she was a woman. Normally, such a fact would be a disadvantage, as she knew from years of sparring with Rust, who never stayed his hand against her. This man, though, had been taught from birth that a woman was weaker, that a woman should be protected. He would hesitate before every strike, and those few seconds of hesitation would be his downfall.

Her heart thudded as she inhaled.

Her fingers clasped the hilt. She drew the knife from the sheath, and she stepped forward.

A feeling of lightness and warmth travelled from where she clasped the blade, up her arm, and to every part of her body. It was a euphoric feeling, a fuzzy sensation that invaded her mind before rage exploded and time lurched forward.

She ran and swung for the back of his exposed neck, but the soldier turned and caught her blade on his own. She saw her father crumple, though the only thing she heard was her own heartbeat in her ears. Finna pushed the locked daggers in an arc, separating them, then brought hers around in a quick circle.

She had left herself open to attack, but her judgement proved correct as the soldier paused briefly before reaching out to slash at her exposed thigh.

Finna smiled. Bare skin was a stupid tactic, even if one knew how to defend oneself properly. If she had been prepared for an attack, she would have at least wrapped her legs in leather. In this one case, however, his hesitation and lunge toward the exposed area gave her the opening she needed. She brought her knife down and slashed his wrist.

He cried out, the sound breaking through the barrier over her hearing, and his knife clattered to the floor. She then jabbed her elbow into his middle as hard as she could, and when he was doubled over, sliced open the side of his neck. The blood, clean and scarlet, spurted for a second, then bubbled and flowed freely from the wound.

The soldier fell, gasping and gurgling as his own blood poured from his body and filled his lungs.

Finna wiped at her eyes. He would be dead in two minutes.

She turned and ran to her father, who lay lifeless on the ground, a trail of red running from the corner of his mouth. "Dadâ€¦" The blade had been long, and it had been angled up. Doubtless it had pierced his heart or lungs.

She stood and clenched her free hand into a fist. A man's bowels opened in death, and the stench was already beginning to rise.

"Finnaâ€¦!"

She turned and saw Rust standing in the doorway. He stared at her with wide eyes before he looked down at her father and then back at her.

She looked down as well. "He's gone." She swallowed and pressed her fist against the hollow under her ribs where her chest was tightening. "He was murdered. The gods will remember that."

"Yes, they will," he said quietly.

"I wasn't asking."

She felt his hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Finna looked at him and snapped, "Will it bring him back if I'm not?"

Rust furrowed his brow and said nothing.

She shook her head. "There's nothing to be done."

Rust looked at the fallen soldier, still barely breathing. "The company will be expecting him."

The hot rage flourished again in her head and pounded at her ears. "Then kill them," she said quietly. She looked Rust in the eye. "Kill them all."

He nodded. "Yes, Chief." With that final word, he walked toward the door.

"Wait," she called as a new thought crossed her mind. "Leave one alive." She still needed a messenger.

Rust tipped his head to the side and smiled slightly. "Any preferences?"

Of course he would refer to the soldier named Simon, but she found she could not bring herself to smile back. "Surprise me. And Rust?" She shook her head at him. "I'm not the chief yet." She still needed to go through ceremony, and she still needed the people to openly accept her.

Rust sighed and pushed the door open. "Yes, you are." Then he was gone.

And she was alone.

Her eyes found her father once again. He had looked so shocked as he had fallen, but as she looked at him then, his face betrayed nothing but eternal silence. The fire of rage still burned in her breast, and she picked up her still full cup of wine and threw it at the wall.

The wooden cup fell

A scream caught in her throat and instead spilled from her eyes, hot and blinding. She pressed her hand against her mouth and leaned against the table.

The chief was dead.

Her father was dead.

"Finna."

Already? She wiped her eyes quickly and looked at the door. Rust stood waiting with Kali, Kona, and Rasch. He pushed forward the chosen survivor, and she was not at all surprised to see who it was.

Simon trembled and looked at her with wide eyes. "Pleaseâ€¦Please don't kill meâ€¦"

"Hush now." Finna squared her shoulders and walked over to him with a confidence that pushed aside all of the anger and pain. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want you to do something for me."

He nodded hurriedly. "I won't tell about you. I won't say a wordâ€¦"

She smiled. "But that's just what I want you to do. All of your comrades? I want you to take them back. And I want you to give your Captain my regards, but my regrets. Tell him I received his message, and that I didn't like it."

For a moment, Simon stopped breathing. Then he exhaled with a shudder. "You? You're their leader?"

She used a finger to tip his chin up and said quietly, "Can you do that for me? Can you tell him I can't accept the new terms?" Without waiting for an answer, she looked at Rasch and said in Norse, "Get him out of my sight."

The quiet man nodded and grabbed Simon's shoulder and started to pull him out of the room.

"Rasch?" she said as a new thought occurred to her. "Sever the heads and bag them." She gestured to the dead man on the ground. "This one too, when you get the chance. I don't want his burden to be too heavy." These men had been responsible for her father's death. They deserved no honours and no proper funerals.

Rasch nodded again and left, pulling Simon after him.

She swallowed hard, suppressing the thought that her father was gone, and looked at Kali and Kona. "Both of you, follow him. Make sure he doesn't run."

The twins nodded and left, and even before they had closed the door, she felt the pain inside intensify.

"I'll get one of the thralls to move the bodies," Rust said.

She nodded.

"He'll have to be burned."

She held her middle as the tears welled up inside. They did not come from her eyes, but from deep within her gut, a heaving so powerful it burned her stomach and chest. Her eyes flooded, and the pain was so great, she was certain it would kill her.

But she did not die, for two arms turned her around and pulled her into an embrace so familiar it made the tears flow faster. Eventually, the storm inside passed and left her aching and trembling in every joint and muscle in her body.

He said nothing but pulled back from her and gently wiped her cheeks.

Her chest still hurt, and she wished she could carve out that place and toss it into the sea. But the pain was too deep to be touched by any blade, so instead she took a shuddering breath and nodded and started toward the door.

As soon as she had stepped into the light, he grabbed her elbow and pulled her away, down the path to the outer edges of the village where the farms sat. She knew why he did it. He wanted to keep her from hearing and seeing the news spreading through the trade stalls and houses in the center of town.

But she heard it and saw it still, in the calls of birds and in the movement of trees and the whole island seemed to cry that the chief was dead.

She saw the words on his lips as he pulled her toward his home and past his sister, who was pulling up cabbages.

She saw it in Magwart's eyes as she dropped her work and ran to open the door to their house.

She felt it in the bed they sat her on, his bed.

She tasted it in the ale they gave her to drink. The chief was dead. Her father was dead.

She lay back and felt the pain returning, climbing from her chest and through her throat and out of her mouth. The storm racked her body, and she only wanted to sleep. To sleep and to forget. To sleep and dream and wake from the nightmare of reality.

But she could not sleep. There was work to be done, she knew, and she was the only one who could do it. She had inherited a war and a people, and she had to protect them until her last breath.

And with that final thought, she succumbed to darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>She kept her head down as she walked through crowds of people. City folk always seemed to have somewhere to go, a fact that was an advantage. She could pass through and find shelter and food and still be unnoticed. But York was not a happy place for her.<p>

It had been years since her last visit to the second largest city in England. Even in that time, the population had grown from nine thousand to almost ten thousand. She had heard that London boasted twenty, and she could not even begin to fathom such a size. So many people in one place made her nervous. It was easy to blend, but it was also easy to disappear.

"Hey!"

A rough hand grabbed her arm and spun her around. She kept her head down and slowly reached for the knife hidden in her belt.

Another hand pulled the red hood from her belt. "What's this?"

She did look up then, and she refused to look away from the young man who held her fast. His expression faltered for a moment, but he smiled when another man appeared behind him.

"Where are you going?" the second man asked.

"Want to have a bit of fun?"

Her fingers twitched on her knife hilt. She could take two men, but she did not think she would have to. If she just cut one, the other would run.

"Is there a problem?" a voice asked behind her.

The young man who held her hand scowled, and his friend said, "Only if you have one, monk."

Ymma sighed and looked behind her.

An older man in brown robes smiled at her and then at the two men. "I have no problem with you, youth." He nodded. "But he might."

Ymma followed his gaze and saw a man wearing the badge of a constable headed through the passing crowds. The man let go of her arm and dropped the red hood, and he and his friend ran off. She rubbed at her elbow while the monk bent down and picked up the hood and handed it to her.

"It's not mine," she said. "It belonged to a friend."

The monk nodded. He had a kind face. "You look tired. Do you need a place to stay?"

That was exactly what she needed, but she doubted the gods would like her staying with Christian priests. "I'm fine. Thank you, leof."

The monk nodded at the constable as he passed and then turned his gaze upward. "The alewife's put up her bushel."

Ymma turned and saw that a small bush of green sat atop a pole outside a small house. She had not eaten that day, and her mouth watered at the thought of fresh bread.

"Let me buy you a meal and a drink, and then you can go on your way."

Ymma nodded and followed the monk. She smiled to think that Finna would never do such a thing. Finna would rather starve than share a meal with a Christian. But Ymma was hungry and felt that no harm could come from a few minutes' respite.

They entered the alehouse where a group was already gathering to break from daily work. As they sat at a small table and the monk spoke to the alewife, she looked about her.

The room was lit by a large fire in the center of the floor and by open windows that had real glass panes in them.

She had not seen real glass since she had been a child.

"You're not from around here," the monk said.

She looked back at him. "No, leof."

"Where are you from then?"

"Hexham," she replied. It was a town not two days from York.

"Hexham," the monk repeated. He smiled. "I know a few of the brothers up there. Tell me. Is it in Scotland or England right now?"

Ymma did not know. The town had changed hands so many times in the past decade that any report could be considered unreliable. "We never know," she said with a grin.

The monk laughed at that. "Good!"

The alewife appeared with a bowl of stew, a loaf of brown bread, and two mugs. She set everything down, took a few coins from the monk, and left.

"I did not know monks carried money," Ymma said. She supposed that the Norman monk had carried them, the one with the beautiful face, but he had been a very odd sort. A good sort.

"I always carry a few when I leave the abbey. For a beggar or a traveller."

She decided that this monk was also a good sort, though markedly less odd.

He pushed the bowl, the bread, and one mug toward her. "So where are you really from?"

She looked at him.

"Come now," he said with a shake of his shaved head. "A young girl traveling alone? You're not likely to tell me the truth the first time."

She tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the stew. "Macaskin," she said. That was not the truth either, but she had lived there for years.

"The Islands?" He raised his eyebrows and waited for a moment as she ate. "So you're a Scot?" He said it without judgement.

She shook her head. The stew had real beef in it, and the broth was heavy. The bread was nutty and warm.

"One of the Norsemen, then?" He sounded sad as he said it, and she knew why. Williame had successfully driven the Vikings from the area around York not months before. The land had lost valuable allies and trade partners.

She shook her head again and swallowed. "I'm English. I'm from a small village off the coast. We just live off trade with them. The Vikings."

He nodded. "So are you really headed to London?"

"Yes, leof."

He leaned forward as she continued to eat and drink. "Here, I'll make you an offer. You finish that, and I can put you up in one of the rooms at the abbey. In a few days, we'll send you down to London in the cart with a few of our brothers. They're going to pick up some illuminating paints, and they'll be happy to have you accompany them. It will be safer for you than traveling alone."

She smiled tightly. She did not hate Christians as Finna did, but her past experiences made her wary of the priesthood. "That's very kind of you, but I'm afraid—" She trailed off as a feeling of intense discomfort hit her.

Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

"Yes, child?"

She looked at the monk, but she knew he was not the problem. No, something was wrong elsewhere.

She had to go back.

"I'm sorry," Ymma said. "I have to leave."

The monk furrowed his brow and gestured to the half-eaten bowl and bread. "Surely you can finish—"

She stood and shook her head. "I can't. Thank you, leof."

He rose as well. "Let me at least provide you with a pack—"

She backed away from the table. "Thank you, but no. I can't stay." Then she turned and ran into the street.

She looked up at the sun. The journey would take about a week, perhaps a few days less if she ran and did not stop for long. For a moment she considered asking the monk if she might borrow a horse, but when would she return it?

No, she had to go.

She turned north and began to run.

\* \* \*

><p>The volume in the Great Hall rose to a deafening level as the gathered Vikings called for justice, for vengeance for loved ones who had fallen two days earlier.<p>

And he agreed with them. The attack had been unforeseen by the Berkians and by the \_hofgo\_Ã°\_i\_. The gods were not fair, but they were just, and they would deliver justice into the hands of those who sought it.

But for all that he agreed with them, Stoick wanted nothing more than for the people to be silent. When he bellowed as much, they did quiet, and then he announced, "We will go. In three days time, we will fly and meet them in battle." Dragons would easily overtake the ships, and if the ships had reached the northern coast of Scotland, the Vikings could still make their move before the men reached their base. "They will know what it means to declare war on Vikings!"

Once more the crowd erupted with cheers and battle cries.

"Arm yourselves and prepare!"

And with that last rousing command, the men and women of Berk began to file out of the hall. Not far from Stoick, the youngest Hofferson boy rose slowly. His eyes were sunken and shadowed with sorrow, his skin was pale with grief. Out of all the others who had lost their families, Stoick chose to approach that boy, for Stoick himself knew all too well the pain of being young and losing one's wife. He clapped the boy on the shoulder twice, and the boy nodded.

"Grimefoot," said his oldest brother, who then nodded to Stoick and led the younger boy out.

That had been the only loss the family had suffered, though Stoick was very aware that there had almost been a second. With that thought, his eyes fell on his son, who had not moved from his seat on the other side of the hall.

It was slowly becoming ritual. Stoick would make a decision, and Hiccup would remain behind and voice his opposition only after everyone else had left. He would never defy his father openly, but he showed no fear of questioning him in private.

Stoick was proud of that. It mean he was growing. He was learning to reason as a leader should, though he still had much to learn.

True to their odd sort of tradition, Hiccup waited until the last person had left and the huge doors had slammed shut before he said, "This is my fault."

Stoick sighed and walked over to him. Of course he would think so. Hiccup had a remarkable talent for blaming himself for every situation that went awry. Stoick partly blamed himself for that. They were two of a kind, he supposed, each man blaming himself for things he could not change and things over which he had no control. "Don't say that."



Hiccup looked up at Stoick.

Of course he would think so. Hiccup had been the one to bring the prophecy home. The prophecy had proven false, but that was not his fault. "He's been wrong before."

Hiccup took a deep breath. "We can't go after them, Dad."

He had been waiting for this. "Do you think the gods deliver to the man who sits meekly by? Or do you think the gods deliver to the man who fights for what he wants?" He repeated their old adage, "The gods are not fair, but they are just."

Hiccup nodded, then slapped his hand on the table. "I think it's stupid to go after them." He gestured aimlessly with his arm. "Thatâ€|That wasn't all of their men, and most of them never landed! What do you think they'll be like on land? On their own land? They'll be stronger, they'll have better weapons, better terrainâ€|They will have the advantage of being at home."

Stoick put his hands on the boy's shoulders. He was thinking like a warrior. "And we'll have the advantage of surprise. And we'll have dragons. They can't fight us in the skies."

Hiccup was silent, so rather than waiting for conversation, Stoick openly invited it. "Unless you have any better ideas that don't involve staying hereâ€"

"I'll go," Hiccup said quietly.

Stoick breathed in sharply. He had not been expecting that, though it made perfect sense that his son would say such a thing. "Hiccupâ€"

"No, Dad, listen." Hiccup stood up. "I'll go. We'll take a company, make a treaty, and I'll teach them what they want to know."

It was such a typical response, Stoick was amazed he had not predicted it. It was selfless, idealistic, and entirely ridiculous. "You're not going anywhere." He turned away.

"Why?" Hiccup demanded.

Stoick clenched his fists. Because he had already lost his wife and countless friends. He would never take that risk.

"It's easy! It's what they want, and it would stop all of thisâ€"

"You are my son!" Stoick shouted as he slammed his own fist on the table. "And I'll be damned to Hel before I give my son into the hands of those savages!" He straightened. "What happens when they don't let you leave?"

"Why would they keep me if I teach them everythingâ€"

"You're not going." He sighed and turned around. "We're heading off to fight." He looked at his son who was watching him with his furrowed, determined look. The boy had so much of him and so much of his mother in him. "Hiccup, I know it doesn't make much sense now,

but when you have more experience with war, you'll understand how to end it."

Hiccup scoffed. "A lot of good it did you."

Stoick stiffened. "Hiccup."

"I'm just saying!" Hiccup held up his hands. "I had no experience whenâ€"

"That doesn't mean you know everything, Son!" Of course he would bring up that success. Hiccup had ended the war against the dragons, and it had been a decisive and almost clean victory. But Stoick knew that men were not dragons. It was a different kind of fight. One could always trust a dragon to be a dragon, but one could not always trust a man to be human. "One battle does not make a warrior."

"One very successful battle," Hiccup pointed out.

"When you are the chief, you'll understandâ€"

"You always say that!" Hiccup cried. The door to the Great Hall creaked open, but he continued, "That I'll understand someday. But what if someday comes and I still don't understand? I need to understand nowâ€"

"Stoickâ€" Said Gobber's voice from across the room.

The chief held up a hand. "Wait, Gobber." He looked down at his son. There was so much of him in the boyâ€|But Stoick could remember what he had felt three years before when he had watched his only son fall. He had not known his boy then, and he had regretted it deeply. He was determined that he would never feel that way again. "I'll take half of the island," he said. That way, in case of the worst, there would still be some to carry on the populations. The Vikings would not fall. Their descendants would reach the edges of the earth.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Oh, congratulations, Dad. You managed to come up with an even dumber idea. What happens when we get killed and half of Berk is still here waiting for another attackâ€"

We? "Didn't you hear me? You're not going anywhere," Stoick repeated.

For a moment, all was silent. Even Gobber did not speak, which must have been a first.

Then the moment ended and realization dawned on Hiccup's face. "Whatâ€|No. You need meâ€|" He looked at Gobber.

"Oh, no," the man said as he shook his head. "I'm staying out of this one."

Stoick put his hands on Hiccup's shoulders. "I need you here in case the worst does happen, in case of attacksâ€|" He dropped his hands. "You and Astrid will stay here with half the village."

Hiccup took a deep breath and let it out. Slowly, the look of determination fell from his face, and he hung his head in defeat. Even Hiccup knew when he was fighting a losing battle. "She won't

like that."

"Then you should explain it to her."

Hiccup looked up then and breathed in deeply and pressed his lips together. Then he let his breath out in a rush as he said, "Yeah, she won't listen to me."

Stoick laughed. Hiccup was just about the only person Astrid did listen to. The two were inseparable. It was a damn good thing they were getting married. "Of course she will."

"No, she won't" Hiccup insisted. "She definitely won't. Trust me. She won't even talk to me right now!"

Stoick clapped him on the back. "What did you do? Tell her you didn't want to marry her?" He let out a bark of laughter that ended abruptly when he saw how Hiccup winced. He had not! "Fix it."

Hiccup threw out his arms. "What, like it's my fault? I didn't! She just interpreted it that way!"

"It doesn't matter if you said it!" Stoick jabbed a finger in the center of Hiccup's chest, and the boy stumbled back. He had grown, but he was just as wiry as he would ever be. "You need to fix it!" He massaged his brow. "Hiccup, I may not know too much about women. No man really does. But I do know one thing. It doesn't matter what you think or what you did or what you meant. And it doesn't matter what her part in it was. It will always be your fault."

Hiccup sighed. "Yeah, I'm starting to figure that out."

Stoick gave him a push toward the door. "Go fix it, then!"

Gobber chuckled as Hiccup stumbled toward the door. The sound of his son's footsteps still made Stoick's heart beat hard. The soft pad of the boot followed by the hard click of metal against stone.

Friends of his had lost limbs, friends of his had been near death, but the experience of almost losing his son had been different. Never again, he swore to himself. Never again.

Gobber walked up to Stoick as the door closed. "I used to know everything too. Smarter than my own father, I was." He waved his hook. "But I'm not that young anymore." Then he chuckled again.

"What am I going to do with him?" Stoick gestured toward the door. "With them?" His boy and that girl would run Berk mad if no one bothered to check on them. They were both headstrong and unpredictable.

"I once told you that you can only prepare him," Gobber said.

"Yes, I remember."

"He's a good lad."

Stoick sighed. "He's not ready."

"Neither were you, if I remember. Young and stubborn, you were." Gobber knocked him with his elbow. "Scared silly when you became chief. And scared sillier when you got married."

Stoick smiled at the memory. He had been scared out of his wits. He had managed to kill a Monstrous Nightmare at age fourteen, but at age twenty-five when he had been preparing to marry the most beautiful woman he had ever knownâ€¦Nothing could prepare a man for that sort of adventure. Berk faced a new threat, though, one they had not faced in his lifetime. "I'm still scared Gobber. I'm scared for him. I'm scared for us." He looked over at his friend. "Is that a bad thing?"

Gobber shrugged. "Nah. Fear just means you're not stupid."

Stoick nodded. "You'll be out there, won't you?" They had fought in their last battle side by side, and he wanted this one to be no different.

Gobber knocked him again. "You know I will."

\* \* \*

><p>The words on the page swam in circles before his eyes. Over the past months he had been studying hard, and he had discerned patterns in the language and had learned to speak on his own. But on that day, he could not concentrate for the sounds coming from the yard.<p>

There were three dragons. The first one they had captured had flown off in the night, never to be seen again. After that the men had captured two more, one deep purple and one the colour of the sky. They had brilliant designs on their wings and heads, and their tails had long spines that the dragons shot like spears at any man who ventured too close for any purpose but to deliver food. Those they had locked in tight cells built from rock and steel. Then they had found the third. It was bright green with huge wings and a terrifying maw. He remembered the day it had been brought into the abbey. The men had wrestled with the chains, constantly throwing on new ones as the metal heated, for that dragon fought not by spewing flame but by setting itself on fire. Finally, the flames had subsided and the defeated best had been led away.

Sine then, the dragons had decided to make as much noise as they possibly could, screaming and bellowing all day and all night.

Jehan could not blame them. He was not even caged as they were, but still he wanted to scream. The thought of the dragons in their cells made him feel sick. All creatures were created by God and were thus deserving of respect and kindness.

He slammed the book closed and pushed it across the table.

Perhaps he could go into the village and speak with the two priests who ran the church. The men were open to another who lived in service to God, and their wives were kind. They had helped him greatly in his attempt to learn their language.

Or he could converse with anyone else who happened to be in the village. Perhaps the alehouse would be full.

A small thought crept in and reminded him that if he went into the village, he might see the Norsewoman again. The priests had never mentioned her, but had seen her several times since their last encounter in the compound. She never had the red hood with her. She seemed to be amicable with the people, especially with the brewer and breweress.

Only once had she given any indication that she noticed his watching for her. She had been leaving the alehouse and laughing with a man with dark, striking features. She had stopped and looked at him. Her dark eyes had not let him look away as she had nodded at him—a brief but certain acknowledgement. Then the man had noticed him and had made a remark to her, and she had laughed and walked away with him.

The woman did not cover her laugh with a hand as some women did. She threw her head back and smiled wide, uninhibited.

Jehan shook his head to clear the nonsense. He needed to leave the stifling stone walls and constant wailing. He needed to breathe. And he needed company.

He rose, but as soon as he was on his feet a knock sounded at the door. He sighed and opened it to young soldier with a leather cap.

The boy wrung his hands. "You're needed in the dining hall. You had best come quickly."

Jehan stepped into the hall and followed the boy down the corridors. "What happened?"

"Some men have died," the boy said. "The men they sent this morning. The Vikings sent them back dead."

There had been conflict. He immediately hoped that the Norsewoman with the dark eyes had avoided any of the violence, but then he shook his head and reminded himself that he must first pray for the souls who had passed. That was, of course, the most likely reason he had been called.

He clasped the cross he wore around his neck with his left hand as he and the boy began to run.

All but one had been barely older than Jehan himself.

The boy pushed open the doors to the dining hall and Jehan stepped inside.

It was a long room and narrow. The walls were unadorned, there were only two windows, and no columns held the ceiling and kept it from sagging. The abbey at home had large, round vaults everywhere one went and magnificent windows and beautiful carvings and wall hangings detailing the lives of the Saints and Christ. But that abbey had been built by the king.

"And that's what happened, Sieur," said a soldier at one end of the room where he stood with two other men.

It was Simon's voice. He had survived then.

Armine, the young Acting Captain from Rouen, looked up and waved Jehan over. "Anything else?"

Simon took a breath. "And thenâ€¦the chief said to tell you they had received the message and could not accept. And thenâ€¦" He swallowed. "Then the chief said to tell you that she had received the message and that she could not accept."

Jehan stumbled. Their chief was a woman. He had never heard of such a thing.

"They broke the treaty," said the soldier standing next to the Acting Captain.

Armine waved his hand. "I had predicted this when I gave Osmont the order."

"But the Vikingsâ€¦"

"The Vikings are an irritation and nothing more." Armine tapped his fingers against the pommel of his sword that hung by his side. "If they were to rise against us in support of the Dragon Tamer, they might prove a problem, but as things now standâ€¦" He squared his shoulders. "They are separated from the Northern Vikings. Their surrounding allies have fled. We can crush them easily."

Simon cleared his throat. "Their chiefâ€¦"

The man next to Armine nodded. "Yes? Don't stop there."

Simon's head turned to his right before he looked back at the men. "Sheâ€¦She's the one who killed Osmont. She gave the ordersâ€¦" His head dropped.

Jehan was close enough to the men now to notice a sack in front of Simon. There were clear lumps in the sack, which may have once been brown but had since been darkened to black by the same liquid that surrounded it and stained the stones scarlet.

He swallowed the nausea that welled inside of him.

Armine looked at Simon. "There's something else."

Jehan stopped near the men, and he could see Simon's expression. The soldier looked at him and then at his feet.

"I thought it was someone else," he muttered. "Because it couldn't have been her. Because the chief was supposed to be a man. And because she acted likeâ€¦" He looked up at Jehan again, beseeching rather than condescending. "Andâ€¦and becauseâ€¦" He looked down again.

"Because what?" Armine asked.

"She'sâ€¦I've seen her before."

Jehan stopped breathing. He knew. It was the woman, the Norsewoman who had never given her name. The Norsewoman who had passed herself

as a prostitute.

"She's been inside before."

Armine waited a few moments before confirming, "She's been here."

Their chief was the same woman. A harlot, a liar, and now a murderer. He thought for a moment of her dark eyes and her free laugh.

Delilah had been beautiful as well.

Simon hung his head. "Yes."

"And you said nothing."

"Iâ€|"

"Speak louder."

Simon looked at Jehan and then turned his head away. "I thought she was one of our women."

"You thought she was an Anglo-Saxon whore," the man next to Armine clarified.

Simon said nothing.

Armine raised one eyebrow. "You brought her here?"

Simon looked up as panic overwhelmed his features. "Yes, butâ€"

"Take him." Armine waved a hand at the soldier who stood next to him. "We'll deal with him later."

The other soldier grabbed Simon's arm. "Where?"

Armine sighed. "I don't know. The cellar? Let him keep company with spiders and rats." He tapped the pommel of his sword again. "After you've taken care of him, go to the yard and start drilling the men. We need to be ready in case something happens before the others return. Once they do, we'll start making plans to crush the Vikings."

Jehan winced.

The soldier nodded dragged Simon away.

Armine looked at Jehan again and furrowed his brow. "You." His face relaxed and he smiled. "You're the Novice from Rouen. No." He nodded. "Junior, right? Jehan, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Armine gestured to the sack. "I realize you have not taken your vows yet, but can you still say a prayer for these men?"

Jehan nodded and closed his eyes and began the rite. The words came more naturally than they should have, even though he had not said

them in months. When he had finished, he left the room before he had been dismissed.

He closed the doors and leaned against them and closed his eyes. He did not know what would happen to Simon, and he did not know what would happen to the families of the men who had been slain. But he did know that by not speaking when he had known the woman's origins, he had played a part in their demise.

"Is it true?" a quiet voice asked.

He opened his eyes and looked at a girl, no older than fifteen, who was wringing her hands.

"Is it true what they're saying? That they're allâ€¦"

He nodded. "Yes." It was true, and it was partly by his own fault.

The girl stepped forward. "My fatherâ€¦"

Jehan sucked in a breath. There had only been one man old enough to be a father. He grabbed her arm before she took another step and pulled her away from the door.

"Waitâ€¦I need to seeâ€¦" She started to struggle then. "Stop!"

He tightened his grip on her arm and pulled her around the corner.

"Let me go! Let meâ€¦"

He stopped and held her shoulders fast. "Listen! You can't!" The girl looked up at him with big, brown eyes.

The Norse woman he had met had brown eyes. No, their chief had brown eyes. Dark and nearly impossible to read. Four months had passed, but he could still remember how he had felt under the gaze of those eyesâ€¦"impossibly anxious, as if those eyes had been turning him inside-out and pulling forth secrets he had not known he had.

That woman had killed this girl's father. Whether she had done the deed directly or had ordered it he did not know.

He grabbed the girl's hands. "Go rest. Please." She did not need to know how little of her father remained.

"What will I do?" she whispered. "I haveâ€¦My fatherâ€¦"

He pulled her down the hall, away from the hall and what was left of the soldiers and her father. She did not fight him but stumbled along blindly, her quick breath echoing with their footsteps in the stone corridors.

In a few moments, he pushed open his chamber door and pulled her inside. He turned and held her shoulders fast. "Listen to me. You must promise me that you won't try to see your father."

She stared at the ground with wide eyes and said nothing.



He shook her slightly. "\_Promise\_ me." It was wrong to force her to promise him anything. The Lord had instructed that one should not swear by anything on earth or in Heaven, and he knew he should be encouraging the opposite. But he needed assurance that the girl would not try.

She looked up. "What did they do to him?" Her lip and chin trembled and she croaked, "What did theyâ€¦" She then pressed a hand over her mouth and began to cry.

Jehan let his hands drop. His life until coming to England had been fairly void of women, and he was uncertain as to what one was supposed to do when a girl was crying. Was he supposed to say something? Or was it better to say nothing at all?

Finally, he put one hand back on her shoulder.

The girl stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest as she wept. At a loss, he patted her head gently and waited.

A few minutes passed before she pulled away and wiped at her eyes.

"Are you tired?" he asked because he did not know what else to say.

She nodded.

"You should sleep."

She nodded again.

He looked at his pallet and gestured toward it. "You can rest here, if you like." What that right? He did not know, but he did not want to send her away, and he felt that she did not need to be with the other women just then.

The girl nodded a final time and stumbled toward the pallet and collapsed on it.

He felt that he should leave her, so he quietly walked out of the room and shut the door as she began to sob once more. And he continued to walk, his feet seemingly pushed forward by thoughts of men murdered by a female chief.

He stopped when he came to a small and unused courtyard between the back of the chapel and the main abbey. There was a high window on the chapel, and the glass glinted golden in the sunlight.

Just below the window was a tree, and in one of the highest branches there was a nest where two small blackbirds, late for the southward migration, chirped happily even over the groans of the dragons not far from them. The larger of the two birds danced between the higher branches while his mate hopped on the edge of the nest.

He envied them.

He envied their nature, their lives, their freedom. They knew nothing of war. They could fly where they wished. When they finally went

south, would they pass over his home?

He had once heard that blackbirds only ever had one mate for the entirety of their lives.

Suddenly, a large spot of brown swooped from the sky and struck the tree before slamming in to the ground, leaving a cloud of black feathers just above the blackbird nest. The female's cries grew loud and shrill.

It was a brown and grey hawk, he saw, sitting on the ground and clutching the male blackbird, completely unmoving, in the larger bird's bright talons.

It was the way of things, he knew. The strong preyed upon the weak. No one could stop nature. But knowing did not stem the desire to stop it or the anger that surged in his gut.

He picked up a stone near his boot and threw it at the hawk, but the stone fell to the ground several feet away from the bird, who merely glanced at it before flying into the air and over the wall with its prey.

The female bird still called frantically in her nest.

He could not do anything. He could not save anyone. Trying would only make the situation worse.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, though whether it was for himself or the small bird he did not know. "I'm sorry."

\* \* \*

><p>Her tongue felt so incredibly heavy and large, and here eyelids were stuck. She felt as if she had slept for days. Had she? And why was she sore all over? Where on earth had she fallen asleep?<p>

Her fingers twitched on the furs beneath her.

Furs. She was in her own bed. She was in her own bed because the lÃ|knir had brought her there. The lÃ|knir had brought her there because she had been injured, and that was why she felt so sore.

She had been injured, and Hiccup hadâ€

Hiccup.

She clenched her hands into fists and squeezed her eyelids and tried to will herself to go back to sleep. Perhaps then she would not have to remember, and she could remember very clearly.

When she had asked him to explain, she had already known, but she had not wanted to believe it. But he confirmed it. She could remember every word he had said. "Because you're you," he had said. "What is wrong with you?" he had said. "I knew you wouldn't be able to get it," he had said.

Because it was not marriage he did not want; it was Astrid herself.

She took a shuddering breath.

She still remembered the day he had kissed her for the first time. It was perfectly clear in her mind. She had only just passed sixteen years, and the snow had been falling heavily. Before that day, she had instigated everything, every touch, every kiss, and he had only followed. They had been close friends for two years, but at some point, and she was not sure when, that had changed slightly. She had stopped kissing him just because she felt like it and she enjoyed kissing him, and she had started kissing him as if to say something she could not put into words. His laugh, loud and rasping, had stopped making her laugh as well and had started making her stomach tighten in odd ways. His green eyes had stopped making her smile and had started making her wonder what she looked like in those eyes. On that particular day, she had not wanted to see him because she had three spots the size of her fourth fingernail: one on the side of her nose, one just above her lip, and one on her chin. Waspnest had declared that she could ice a needle and get rid of the blemishes quickly, but Kata had said that the spots were nothing to be embarrassed about and that trying to remove them would leave scars. In the end, Astrid had left her house if only to escape the arguing of her sisters-by-law. She had found her way to the forge, where the air was warm and where he was working. If he had noticed the spots, he had not let on. Then Gobber had stepped out, Hiccup had made a joke, and she had laughed. And then he had kissed her. She must have looked very shocked because he had immediately apologized, but she had told him it was perfectly alright.

But nothing was perfectly alright anymore, because Hiccup did not want her.

He would tell her he loved her, but he would only say that he had wanted her since childhood. And that made all the difference. Perhaps, then, he had not loved her at all. Perhaps he had only ever wanted her. Perhaps he had only ever had this idea of her conjured up in his head, and that was what he loved, and she had failed to meet that. When had he realized that?

And was she the same?

No, she decided. She loved him. She knew she did. She knew his shortcomings and his strengths, and she loved him for all of them. She hurt too deeply to not be in love.

A clatter came from the steps leading to the loft and she looked over and saw her mother, her blonde hair perfectly wound at the nape of her neck, rising through the hole in the floor.

Gundi smiled brightly. "Oh, sweetheart. You're awake! How are you feeling?" She pulled a chest along side the bed and sat on the lid. "They gave you something to make you sleep, but I didn't realize it would be this long! You've been out for two days."

Astrid wished she were still sleeping. "Where's Stormfly?" she croaked.

"Outside, dear," he mother said as she patted her hand.

"Can I see her?"

Gundi shook her head firmly. "You're not leaving this bed any time soon, and you know the rule. No dragonsâ€"

"No dragons inside," Astrid finished. "I know." She tried to push herself upright, but a pain shot through her leg and she cried out.

Her mother steadied her back and helped her scoot back so she leaned against the headboard.

Astrid wanted to scream. She did not mind being cared for when she was sick or hurt. She hated being helpless.

"The lÃ|knir said you might not walk for a while."

She might have guessed as much. Her gaze fell on the small ring of flowers hanging on the wall across from her bed. Her marriage crown. Even if he did not want toâ€|It would still happen, wouldn't it? Even if she would not walk? "Butâ€|In three daysâ€|"

"Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry."

No. He had won, then. He had called it off while she had been unconscious. "What?" She looked at her mother and prayed that it was a joke.

But her mother simply shook her head and frowned. "In the face of all of this...Stoick thought it best."

She felt a stinging in her chest and eyes. "Hiccup thought it best," she spat.

"Perhaps." Gundi nodded. "He's a practical boy. He knows we can't have the wedding. Not withâ€|" She stopped herself and smiled a bit too hard. "Well."

Something was wrong. "Mom?"

"He's here you know. Hiccup."

Something was horribly wrong. "Mom."

"I'll tell him you're awake." Gundi patted her hand and rose from her seat on the chest.

"Momâ€|"

But her mother disappeared downstairs again, and Astrid was left only with a dull ache of dread and anticipation. After a moment, she heard the familiar soft pad and sharp click of Hiccup walking on wood.

She closed her eyes. She did not want to see him. But she did want to see him and talk to him and make everything alright again. She wanted to hear him tell her that he loved her, even if she knew he did not.

The footsteps halted and he cleared his throat.

She looked at him. His eyes were so greenâ€|

He swallowed and smiled. Then he looked down at the floor and sat on the chest.

She was glad he did not look at her anymore. When she saw his eyes, all she could remember was how they looked when he had told her he did not want her.

"Lucky you," she said.

He looked up at her then. "What?"

His voice normally soothed her, the nasal mumble that she loved so dearly. But then it only caught in her chest like a knife. "Lucky you. You got out of marrying me without even trying."

Hiccup breathed deeply through his nose and closed his eyes. "Astrid, would you please just listen to me?"

She looked up at the ceiling. "I did listen, Hiccup."

"But you never give me a chance to explain what I mean?"

She turned her head and glared at him. "Why don't you just say what you mean?"

"Like right now!"

She scoffed. How dare he. How dare he blame her when the whole thing was his fault. That's all he had done—"pass blame. "If you're so dissatisfied with me, why don't you just find someone else?"

His eyes widened and he shook his head. "I know that's what it sounds like, but that's not—That's not what I mean. At all." He reached for her hand. "Astrid—"

She held her arm close to her chest and his hand stilled in mid-air. A sick feeling settled in her stomach as she remembered the prophecy from months earlier. She would fear it. The hofgo—°—i had said that she would fear it. And so she had. And she was not marrying Hiccup. Possibly not ever. She shook her head and murmured, "He was right—"

Hiccup leaned forward. "Who?"

"Get out." He had only just arrived, but she did not want to see him. He was only a reminder of what she wanted, of what would never be, of himself.

"Astrid—"

"Get out." And he was a reminder of the fact that no matter how desperately she had held to the idea that the hofgo—°—i had been wrong before, the priest had been right.

Hiccup grabbed her wrist. "What did you mean by 'he was right'?"

She looked into his eyes and saw a desperate panic, not for truth, but for what he wanted to hear. Of course he had started to piece it together. Damn him for being so smart. "I said get—"

"What does that \_mean\_?" He furrowed his brow. "What did he actually say?"

Even as she tried to fight against it, the secret bubbled from her lips. As the words came, his face grew more troubled, and she began to hope that he was troubled over them. Over \_her\_.

But when she had finished, he shook his head and said, "Why didn't you \_tell \_me\_?"

She wanted to remind him that he had not told her quite a bit as well, but he continued, "If I had known he said something different, then I would have known that he could have been wrong about something and we could have been readyâ€|"

She had no right to be angry that he was putting the well-being of the village above their marriage that would never be, but still she was. And still she was angry that he placed blame on her shoulders. "Oh, so this is my fault?"

"I didn'tâ€|" Hiccup pressed his lips together. "I didn't say that."

"You implied it!"

He shook his head. "That doesn't mean I meantâ€"I just can't say anything right, can I?" He threw his hands in the air. "You knowâ€"justâ€"whatever!" He folded his arms and looked away but made no move to leave. A few minutes passed before he said, "My dad's taking half the village south to fight."

Astrid nodded. She would rather talk about that. She would rather talk about anything than talk about their relationship. "Good. We'll get vengeance."

Hiccup looked at her. "Not good. They'll get slaughtered if they face them on their own land. The Normans will have better weaponsâ€"

"But we'll fall in battle," she said. Of course they did not agree. "Would you rather please the gods or be alive?"

Hiccup laughed shortly. "Honestly? Be alive."

She was about to protest, but she also saw his reasoning. After many years, she could at least understand him \_that \_much. He would rather live to please the gods another day, and part of her conceded, so she did not press the matter. "When do we leave?"

Hiccup hesitated before saying, "There is no 'we.' We're not going."

They were staying. The two of them were staying. He was going to keep her there. She thought she had been angry with him before, but the wave of fury that came over her then was more powerful than any anger she had felt before. "Whaâ€"

"It wasn't my decision!" he said quickly.

"But you agree with it!" she said shrilly.

Hiccup's mouth fell open and he stared at her incredulously before gesturing to her legs. "You can't walk!"

"Neither can you," she snapped. She regretted the words as soon as they had been spoken. She regretted the look on his face. She wished she could not careâ€"he had hurt her, after allâ€"but she did.

Hiccup stood. "I should go."

"Wait." She wanted to apologize. For all that she had wanted him to go, she did not want to watch him walk away. But she did not want to say so. Instead, she asked, "What isn't my mom telling me?" He probably did not know, but she would keep him by her side however she could.

He hung his head, and she realized that he did know.  
"Astridâ€"|"

"Please," she whispered. Her request then was less about him and more about whatever secret he was keeping. It was horrible. It had to be.

He looked at her and bit his lip. "It's your sister. Thorhalla.  
Sheâ€"|"

She looked away. A dull thud hit her chest as the news planted itself in her mind. Her sister-by-law was gone. And her brotherâ€"|The whole situation was unreal, as if she were being told a story rather than the truth. "I see."

"I'm sorry."

"Will youâ€"|" She cleared her throat. "Will you stay?" She wanted someone to stay with her. She did not want to be left to her thoughts. She wanted Hiccup to stayâ€"the Hiccup she loved, if he would be that for her. "Just for a minute."

He nodded and sat down on the chest again. After a few moments he took her hand.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The touch was warm and solid and easy. She looked at him and squeezed his hand. "I'm still angry with you."

He squeezed back. "I know."

"I still haven't forgiven you."

He smiled then. "I know."

She smiled back, because his own smile was so crooked and perfect and made her want to laugh even when she could not manage to be happy. That was a very good thing in that moment.

They were going to be alright. They had to be alright.

**\*\*And...No Hiccup.** That's awkward. But he just got his own damn chapter, and he's about to get two more, so...He can deal with being

passed over once.\*\*

\*\*I've sort of almost finished some sketches for some OC's. Links are on my profile page, if you're interested. They\*\*\*\*\*re up on my tumblr, where you can find other interesting things, like articles about the Viking wedding night and Viking contraceptive measures. Important things that have profound impact on normal life.\*\*

\*\*Sorry about my shitty Gaelic. I'm sure my declension is horrible. I'm used to declining the proto-Germanic languages, because the Angles, Saxons and Norse are my expertise. Not the Celts. Oops.\*\*

\*\*leof - This is an OE word that literally means "beloved," but is used as a title of respect for a teacher or monk or master.\*\*

\*\*constable - I'm sure we all know what these are, but it is important to note that this position did not exist until after William the Conqueror had been crowned king.  
><strong>

\*\*I mentioned that the priests are married. This is accurate to history. Until the twelfth century, it was incredibly common for priests, especially rural ones, to marry and have families. And literally no one thought anything of it.\*\*

\*\*Real quick note here...There's a rumour going around. I know this rumour is going around because I have seen the effects of it in published literature. The rumour pertains to armour and mail and weapons. The rumour claims that a sword, swung hard enough and with an extremely sharp edge, can cut through plate armour or chain mail (and other swords?). I stand here today to tell you that this is a blatant lie. I do not claim to be an expert in archaeometallurgy. But the archaeologist I work under is. Would you like to know exactly what I do in the archaeology lab? All day long, I work with exact replicas (which we make ourselves\*\*\*\*â€"\*\*\*\*yes, I can blacksmith) of medieval swords and armour. I slash and hack and stab things and it's amazing. But there is a reason chain mail and armour lasted as long as they did, and the reason is the fact that they are both impenetrable to nearly everything but bullets and canon balls. We're not concerned with plate armour in this story, though, since it won't be widely used for another 200 years. Mail was extremely expensive, and a total bitch to make properly, and only a few soldiers could afford it. A soldier had to buy his own coverings and weapons, and he was lucky if he could afford a leather cap and a wooden pole sharpened into a spear. While mail was decent protection against knives and arrows, it did very little against swords. Because...a hard enough blow, you have internal bleeding, and medieval medical knowledge could not take care of that. Basically, you cannot stab through chain mail. You might break a few links (unlikely if it's riveted, which Viking and Norman mail happened to be,), and those links might break skin, but...That's the best you can do. I have heard tell of longswords doing the job, but that's super late medieval and renaissance and not at all the type of weapon I work with. And not at all the type of sword in use during the 11th century, when the arming sword was in use. The arming sword is a good sword. Light and maneuverable, but it still would not cut clean through mail (if you really want to know all the particulars and see either my own notes or other good research, press the little PM



button on my profile page). And don't let anyone tell you otherwise. However, a crossbow aimed from less than 30 feet away could sometimes do the trick. But do you want to know a secret? Most people who died from arrow wounds died because longbowmen shot them. Because crossbowmen were shit. Literally, those things take no skill. They pack a lot of energy, but those operating them could barely aim. Longbowmen, however, were expert marksmen who trained for years. So much for a "quick" note...\*\*

\*\*And...if anyone is really interested in being super supportive of me, "This Time For Sure" just got nominated for Best One Shot in the FanFiction Grammys. And something about needed a few more nominations to make it to the next round of\*\*\*\*â€|\*\*\*\*nominees. I'm slightly confused by the whole thing because I got the notification, like, an hour ago. So\*\*\*\*â€|\*\*\*\*Yeah. If you're interested, you can nominate that (or anything you write really. Shameless plug going on here) at [www . fanfictiongrammys . weebly . com](http://www.fanfictiongrammys.weebly.com).\*\*

\*\*Leave a review if it suits your fancy. Don't if it doesn't.\*\*

End  
file.